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*Sindbad,
the Thirteenth Voyage*

Contents

Contents

Harun Has Been Born Again
The Last City Built By Magic
And A Taller Town Than Rome
Al-Amin Is Riding
Five Eighths Of The Way To Hell
Mamun The Great Is Riding
I Am A Simple Kid
One Bright Day In The Sun
The Direst Voyage Ever Ship Did Sail
The Ship In The Bottle
More Tedious Than Dragons
Oh Green His Shoes And Wig And Death
The 999th Night Of Scheherazade
Epilog Of Sea-Weed And Hope

Harun Has Been Born Again

There is further mystery about Bassorah which is called a port, even the port of Baghdad, in the Nights and other folklore. But Bassorah could never have been a port, could hardly have been a town. It was no more than a great rock slab set deep in the river mud and scarred by old fires. It's as though it were used as a launching pad for space fleets before such things were ever dreamed of. It is said that one of the missing *Nights* told about Sindbads of Space trading from other worlds with a great Caliph of our world when the skies were more open than they are now.

Legends of the Persian Gulf. Moisha El-Gazma.

This is the Master Narration of the Happenings. It is my own narration and it contains in itself all the narrations of lesser persons.

My main mission was technically a failure in that I let the Ultimate Evil escape from its prison on Gaea-Earth and spread to all of Gaea and to all the other inhabited planets. But I was able to strike an accord with that Ultimate Evil because of my having a foot in each of the worlds. And now we have Order and Peace, though both of them are perpetually bouncing on a sea of uneasiness.

I am the Caliph Mamun the Great who ascended to the Caliphate, following the deaths of my father the Caliph Harun Al-Rashid and my brother the Caliph Al-Amin, in the Moslem year 191 of the Hegira, in the Christian Year of Restored Salvation 813, in the year 1565 from the Founding of Rome, and in the Jewish year 4574 from the Formation of Adam.

Of my reign let it only be written (carved in marble would be better), "He put the world in perfect order." Having done so, I have now retired to my crystal and vitrum cell (except for one hour out of every twenty-four hour day to perform my marital duties) to write this narration and also to write the maxims for the ongoing guidance of the world.

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I am Scheherazade Carrillo y Krynski. I am an authority on the Arabian Middle Ages. And I am quite well known for my collection of Arabian bottles from that period. Thomas Slender of the Smithsonian says that it would have been impossible for me to have collected such a remarkable bunch of bottles without going back in time to get them. He was joking, but I suppose he was correct. Some of the things in the bottles are living creatures. They are referred to in museum catalogs as my 'animations', but I did not animate them. Of one of them, which I keep with me always, I am especially fond. And as for all other things, I have the universe by the tail, and it's all a downhill drag for as far as I can see. I like it.

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I am Master Mariner Essindibad Copperbottom, Citizen of Kentauron Mikron and Farer of many skies and seas, known on Gaea-Earth as Sindbad the Sailor.

There are fakes and impostures, but I am the *real* Sindbad the Sailor. As proof of this, I once had real Sea-Weed growing at the private part of my body. No other Sindbad-claimant

could make that statement originally, but then later the situation became a little bit cloudy. Like Samson, a hero on earlier-day Gaea-Earth, I was seduced by a strange woman and shorn (worse than that, extirpated) of my growing glory. But unlike the case of Samson, my loss was implanted in another. Well, for all that, I remained the real and only Sindbad and he remained only a pretender. I set the record straight as often as I can.

As you will see by the narration, all things fall right for me finally. This is the Thirteenth and Final Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor, and all of my voyages have fairly happy endings. I even have a mutated variety of the original Sea-Weed growing on me again now. Having, as a resolution of my Thirteenth Voyage, put the World Gaea-Earth and several other worlds in perfect order, I will voyage no more. I will be content to sit in the sun, now that I am home on Kentauron Mikron World again, and devote myself to my collection of Ships in Bottles.

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I am John Scarlatti Thunderson of North Chicago. My espionage name is Ali ben Raad. I am the *real* Sindbad the Sailor, and I became the *real* Sindbad the hard way. Essindibad Copperbottom was the *real* Sindbad by birth and inheritance, and I had to replace him by consummate trickery.

I am a simple kid, and now I have become the Number One Spy in the entire universe. I was into Ark Shells early and I was one of the three first viewers of the Fresh-Water Ark Shell Show. I discovered a system of Open-Ended Analytics, and by using it I built the Almost-Anything Space-and-Time Ship. I lived a full life in about four days, and now I am back in Chicago to enjoy my triumph and perhaps to finish high school.

I believe that I lead a happier life than does Essindibad Copperbottom. I have for wife Azraq-Qamar or the Blue Moon, and Essindibad Copperbottom has only Grand-Dame Tumblehome. The Grand-Dame is good enough, I suppose, but she is at least twenty-five years old already; and in other ways she is not quite in the class with Blue Moon either.

I devote myself largely to my collection of Ark Shells now in my latter years. I am seventeen today, and of course my high years are behind me. But I do have my memories.

— a continuation of the Master Narration of Master Mariner Essindibad Copperbottom

Ransack all time and space and you would never find a more pleasant day than this one. My world Kentauron Mikron was known for its pleasant days and nights, but absolute perfection was rather rare even on that 'World-of-the-Amenities.' The songbirds of Kentauron, the singing people of Kentauron, even the music making fish of Kentauron, they could all justify themselves even to ears of stone. This was 'Melody World' itself, and today the world surpassed itself without even trying. To be able to call the most wonderful place in all the universe 'Home' was to be born lucky.

But one member of my circle and then another said "We could lose all of this." And then a shudder ran through my whole circle.

The winy air of Kentauron was in fact bottled and exported. Kentaurians traveling to other worlds would see the air from home advertised. They'd buy a bottle; they'd uncork it. And they'd cry when they remembered Kentauron and its wonders. But today the air of Kentauron was extraordinary compared to that of mere run-of-the-sky planets. Landscape painters would come to Kentauron from other planets to try to catch its wonders. And often they'd break their brushes and eat their pigments out of sheer envy of the place and frustration at the uncapturability of its reality in any medium. But on one day in a thousand the landscape exceeded that of all the other wonderful days to an extraordinary extent; and this was one day in a thousand.

A profitable export from Kentauron was anti-depressant drugs. Break off any frond, pick up any leaf or bud, bruise it, crush it, package it somehow, ship it to Camiroi or Gaea or Dahae or Astrobe, and it will cure the most depressed person there for up to five years. But it will not cause one to hallucinate or to see things that are not there. They were all non-narcotic joy drugs. But today the anti-depressant elixir surpassed itself. The very stones of Kentauron Mikron reeked with joy.

For intelligence-enhancing and memory enhancing qualities one had but to select

something, anything, from the pharmacopoeia of Kentauron World; and whatever one selected would be effective, and today. Ah today! There had never been such a day for intelligence and memory run wild.

There are persons who believe that virtue itself is part of the chemical affair; and invariably there are persons who have come by that belief of such a day as this (they come only about once every seven years) on Kentauron. Even the most stumble-footed and stumble-minded will walk in grace on such a world on such a day.

In the middle of this day, one of the high and beautiful people of Kentauron Mikron spoke a simple statement to six of his close friends, and by it he multiplied the already overflowing delight.

"I have solid word that Harun has been born again," Master-Caliph Charnel spoke in his voice that was like tuney gongs. One could go a long time on some worlds without hearing a sentence like that. "Yes, the very thought of it lights you up, does it not? It has been rumored before, but this time I believe it. He will illuminate the lives of all of us again if we can find him and somehow bring him here. There was always something wrong with Harun being dead. Ah, we seven here will all die, I suppose, and our mourners will murmur 'All flesh is like grass (like French-Lilac-scented grass on Kentauron Mikron), and it will pass away'; and it will seem like a sad but normal thing to them. But it was never a normal thing for Harun to be dead. If he is living again (and I believe that he is) then the whole universe is the brighter for it. I myself can feel its added brightness and delight. His light has been lit again."

"Then why do I feel such premonitions of disaster?" asked Grand-Dame Of-the-Seven-Musics Tumblehome.

"Because you're wired up backwards, Grand Dame," Moses Epistemon said in his wood-winds voice (he was one of the outstanding singing people of Kentauron). "I suppose I'm wired up backwards too, for I also feel premonitions of disaster. Fortunately I am able to put those premonitions far from me. If Harun is born again, then magic is back in the worlds. Even the laws of physics are different when magic is back in the worlds."

There is a color on Kentauron Mikron that is not to be found on any of the other worlds, and now everything in our vicinity was outlined in that unique color. There is on Kentauron an airy good-humor nectar that is beyond all anti-depressant ebullitions. It is compounded of the essence of wit-weed and of the state-of-grace bush, two plants that grow only on Kentauron, two plants to which many legends attach. Some of these legends are a little bit far-fetched. We seven breathed in this good-humor nectar every day of our lives, but the news that Harun had been born again doubled the good humor in us. We seven persons of the splendid humors were:

Master-Caliph Redcrown Charnel. (He had said "We could lose all of this.")

Master-Magus Moses Epistemon. (He had echoed "We could lose all of this.")

Grand-Dame Of-the-Seven-Musics Goodlife Tumblehome. ("I would have changed my name 'Tumblehome' to any name except 'Copperbottom'," she said, "but I'll not change it to that.")

Master-Politicus Rory Quicksilver.

Grand-Damsel Of-the-Commonwealth Drusilla Happyghost.

Master-Metropolitan Peter Sheldrake.

Master-Mariner Essindibad Copperbottom.

The seventh of these persons is myself, and the delight of Kentauron Mikron has not been in vain in me.

"Why are you sure that Harun is born again?" Grand-Damsel Happyghost asked the Master-Caliph Redcrown. Anyone could see that she was quite fond of him the way she fondled him with her voice. She was, in fact, the wife of his bosom.

"As Harun lay dying here on Kentauron Mikron, all untimely still in his golden youth, he whispered a word to me that he would use if he were born again. Only he and myself knew the word, and know that word has appeared to verify a message from him. It is the meaningless but numerologically magic word 'Baghdad'. It has since become the name of one of those mirage cities, one of those cloud cities, that travelers sometimes report seeing, one of those cities whose geography is a little uncertain, one of those builded-in-a-single-night cities. I have learned today that its meaning in Old Kentauron is 'The Last City Built By Magic', but neither Harun nor myself knew Old Kentauron. But that was the word we agreed on. No other new born child on any of the worlds could possibly have spoken that word clearly in the first moment of his life. Oh, it's Harun born again all right! Who will go and find him and bring

him here?"

"Myself, the Master-Mariner." I said. "Who else? How did the message come, Redcrown? Can we see it?"

"No, but you can see the envelope it came in. It's that mute green bird in that cage yonder, my new bird. It came in yesterday with a shipment of talking birds from the planet Gaea-Earth. 'Take me to the Master-Caliph Redcrown Charnel and sell me to him,' the bird told the bird merchant he was consigned to. 'Tell the Caliph I have a message for him and that after I speak it I will be mute forever. But the message will be worth my price.' The bird merchant brought the bird here and I bought him. 'Now, what is the message, Expensive Bird?' I asked him. 'The message is that one Harun says to tell it that that he is born again on the Planet Gaea, and that the signature word is "Baghdad". And now I will be mute forevermore and there is nothing you can tempt me with to make me speak further. But if you want to try it, I prefer to be tempted with the white pectoral meat of the Kentaaron Emperor Squid.'"

The bird nodded that this was indeed the case, and I myself almost rushed upon it to take a chunk of the white squid meat upon which it was dining. But then the Kentaaron apes who were waiting table brought white pectoral meat of the Kentaaron Emperor Squid to all of us. People ate well at the afternoon parties of Master-Caliph Charnel.

"Caliph, do you know why Harun gave *you* the identifying word and first informed you of his rebirth?" Master-Politicus Rory Quicksilver asked.

"After all, I was Harun's father."

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten. Through the aeons the fathers of Harun are pretty much forgotten. It's odd that they should be, for they are usually Caliphs or Kings or something such, outstanding men."

"Yes, like myself," the Caliph grinned. "Master-Mariner Essindibad, can you find Harun and bring him here?"

"There is no use my being the Master-Mariner of Kentaaron if I don't have a live chance at it," I said. "I know the world he is on. That's a starting place. I know that so golden a boy as Harun cannot remain hidden, unless he wishes it. I know that he has some fondness for Kentaaron Mikron or he would not have sent the message. I'll go at once, of course, and I'll take a few of the simples and samples of Kentaaron with me. They'll sustain me. And now I leave the happiest group in the universe behind me, but it would be even happier if Harun were here with us. May we all be reunited here someday."

"There have been quite a few doubts about Harun growing up while he was dead," my wife the Grand-Dame Tumblehome voiced her own doubt.

"Yes, but there were no doubts about him while he was alive here," Caliph Charnel said. "And I do not believe there will be any doubts about him, now that he is born again. Doubts about him simply cannot survive his presence. Will you go alone, Essindibad?"

"Will I go alone, Grand-Dame Tumblehome?" I asked her.

"No. I'll go with you," she said. "As your wife I could do no less. And I have never been to Gaea. Besides, Essindibad, I believe I'm a better locator of transcendent persons than you are."

Grand-Dame Tumblehome and I left within the hour. And we seven, as it would happen, would never all be together again.

After ninety Kentaaron days, we came down on Gaea-World at Bassorah Stone.

The Last City Built By Magic

Planet-falls always make nervous, especially those on a primitive world such as Gaea. What thoughts and flashes can go through the mind in the thousandth of a second while one goes through the three hundred feet of water cushion!

Grand-Dame Of-The-Seven-Musics Goodlife Tumblehome was my sustaining wife on the voyage. She had been the wife of my fourth and seventh and ninth and eleventh voyage-adventures, all of them: and yet these wives are popularly believed to be four different persons.

But how should *anything* be popularly believed of my wife who eschews the popular light as much as I do myself? The popular interest in us has been quite accidental and unsought for.

There has been only one wife in my long life. And though she lost her life on two of those four voyages on which she accompanied me, yet, together, we found her life again in each case. And now she is quick and lively and altogether pleasant, a pearl among swine as the proverb has it. And our voyage-adventures became popular property thus:

The logs of my voyages have all been in code, of course, since they all concerned diplomatic-or-spy adventures in the service of my world Kentaaron Mikron. The thirteen voyage-adventures (that counts the present voyage) have been to seven different planets. The coded log in every case gave them as happening on Gaea-World: and "Gaea" in the Old High Kentaaron Language meant "The World Which Shall Not Be Named".

But somehow the scanner-classifier of documents mistook the unwritten accent and shifted it from the fourth letter to the second. This made it identical to the "Gaea-World" or Earth which circles the Sol-Sun.

So copies of the logs went to Gaea-Earth to the Bureau of Folklore, Fictional Adventure Division. There being no such bureaus or divisions on Gaea-Earth, the copy came to the desk (actually two camel-bags set together) of a Moslem Monk who had become a reference point for curious information. He immediately recognized that they were thumpingly good adventure romance espionage blood-and-thunder yarns. Of course they were! When I spilled my very viscera in surviving them how could they be otherwise?

So my Adventure-Voyages are known on Gaea-Earth as fantasy-fiction rather than as many-leveled fact. In a small way they were popular on Gaea-Earth.

And they returned to Kentaaron Mikron as a treasure trove of Gaea Story-Telling. They were quite popular on Kentaaron Mikron also. They were recognized by the select people of Kentaaron as what they were; and my wife and I took a lot of good-natured kidding about them. And yet those who kidded us about them were the ones who admired them most strongly.

But one of the adventures had indeed happened on Gaea-Earth. So this was the second time that I (but not my wife) have had planet-fall at Bassorah Rock.

"A caution, dear heart," my Grand-Dame Wife said to me as we were about to land. "Let us keep very low expectations about this whole thing. Harun was a liar and a lecher when we knew him before. He was a calumniator. I feel truths about him now that I couldn't have felt if we were still on Kentaaron Mikron with all the associations of him. His jokes, which were his trademark, were shockingly cruel. And his breath wilted the fragile 'Breath-of-Heaven' plant, and only the breath of a devil will do that."

"Superstition and legend, my love," I said. "And what can all that rubbish matter when compared to the joy of being in Harun's presence? Nothing else will stand against such joy as that! And he was only a boy, possibly a divine boy, whatever his age."

"We were all boys and girls then, love, though we had already attained prominence and power. I wonder how Kentaaron Mikron ever survived our precocity. But I doubt if Harun will

play as well this time around. He had only a limited repertoire and we could already see the end of it when he died so untimely. And we're more mature now."

"You are more cynical now, dear," I said. "I have never seen you like this. Harun brought joy, joy, joy. His repertoire was all conveyed in one word, 'joy', yes. But I wouldn't call it limited."

Bassorah Rock is the most primitive sort of landing pad for space vehicles, an excavation in the middle of two muddy rivers where they come together. It has a three hundred foot depth of water to break the fall. And then the sudden rock brings the flight to a sudden end. The best thing that can be said of such a landing pad is that it works.

Oh, we hit! We hit! How we hit!

We splashed the three hundred feet depth of water clear out of the rivers and came bawlingly onto bare and dripping Bassorah Rock. And then that three hundred feet depth came back and floated us up roughly and churningly. We received no damage except bleeding from mouth and nose and eyes and ears. There is really something invigorating about landing on a primitive world.

"What is the Local Time?" I asked the Ship.

"Springtime. It is the local year 4574 since the formulation of Adam the first man according to the Jews (my programming doesn't tell me what Jews are); it is the year 1565 since the Founding of Rome (apparently a town); it is the year 191 after the Hegira from which the Moslems count their time; it is the Year 813 of Restored Salvation according to the Christians. But be you advised that the years on this Gaea-Earth are shorter by one tenth than our Kentauron Standard Years. The implication is that the people of Gaea are in a constant rush to get a year's work done in a foreshortened year."

"Are you able to read the local time and age of the Harun, Ship?"

"About fifty years. The news must have come to Kentauron Mikron by common carrier. It came with a cargo of birds, of course; and neither birds nor other cargo will age when traveling by common carrier. But how can markets be predicted that far in advance? As far as science goes, Harun was always an infant, of course. He wouldn't know of any extraordinary way to send the message."

"Fifty years? Then he stayed dead less than a year. He must be quite an old 'boy' by now."

"That's subject to an error of thirty years either way, Master Mariner. But you know that the Harun will always be a young boy for as long as he lives. Aye, and he will also be a young boy for as long as he bides in death. Aging isn't possible to him. And I'm sorry to have to mention it to you, Master Mariner, but aging doesn't seem possible to you or to your cronies either. It clouds your reputations and casts doubts on your humanity."

"I wish it weren't so, Ship. What is that shining massif upriver?"

"It's a mirage. The name of the mirage is 'The Magic City of Baghdad'. It has been seen in this double-river land for fifty-one years."

"And it is fifty-three years since I was last hereabouts on Gaea," I told my valiant Ship. "I barely missed the birth of the mirage, and I barely missed the birth of Harun. But if the mirage is older than Harun he cannot have caused it."

"Do not be too sure of that, Master Mariner. Before several of his births he worked high magic while still in the womb."

"Phone for camels, Ship. We wish to journey to the mirage."

"There are no phones on Gaea, Master Mariner. But I believe that camels are already on the way."

"Yes, I see a boy on shore and he has two camels with him. And he has the 'camels for hire' message shining out of his face. Boy, boy, untie that little boat there and come out and get us! I want to rent your two camels to go to Baghdad Mirage."

"Be careful, Master Mariner," Ship said. "He may be a boy of the Ghuls or Sila or Ifrit or other unhuman species."

"I have been on Gaea before, Ship, and you have not."

"And I am a total-data-processor, Master Mariner, and you are not," the Ship told me. Nevertheless my wife and I went to the river bank with the boy in the bobbling row boat. We rented the two camels from the boy, and my Dame and myself started to Baghdad Mirage. The boy ran swiftly alongside of us. Too swiftly, too tirelessly. Very likely he was not exactly of the human species.

"How many miles is it to Baghdad Mirage, boy?" I called to him.

"It's two hundred miles, but they are mirage-miles. In real miles it is hardly any distance at all. We can arrive there as soon as we wish."

And then, like wraiths, two other persons appeared, and they were riding swiftly alongside of us. I still wasn't sure of the boy, but I was sure of these two. One of them was an Ifrit and the other one was an Ifritah, which is to say they were a male and female Ifrit. And they were riding on two camels that were also Ifrits.

"Go before us, or behind us," I said to the wraiths or persons of the Ifrit species. "My Dame and I wish to ride alone."

"If wishes were horses you'd still be riding camels," the male Ifrit said. "That's an old proverb. We can neither ride before you nor behind you because we are assigned to be your shadows and so we must ride beside you. Were it a little earlier in the day, we would be riding before you. Were it a little bit later in the day, we would be riding slightly behind you. But we are your shadows; and because of us, your Dame and you may not ride alone. We are shadows with a peculiar assignment. We are to find out what you want to do and we are to prevent you from doing it. We will prevent you even unto your deaths. You are immortal, so you can die except in your spirits if we kill you. We are merely mortals, but we cannot die either in body or in spirit until a milliard (a thousand million) of years have passed. We will dog you two. We will dog you to your deaths. There is no way you can get away from us."

"We don't want to get away from you," my quick-witted wife said. "Our assignment here is to find a pair of Ifrits and study them. It is fortunate that you two appeared just when you did. It saves us searching for a pair of you. Our secondary assignment here is to test out a pair of new and invisible bottles. We want to see how quickly we can trap you in them. Since you cannot see them, it should be easy for us. Oh, oh, we almost had the Ifritah there. She nearly stumbled right into it. Oh, please don't make it too easy for us! We want to have a little *fun* with our investigations and tests. Watch out, watch out, Ifrit! You nearly stumbled into the other bottle. And if you had wandered into it you'd have been trapped there for a milliard of years. Please be careful not to be captured too quickly. 'twould do us out of part of our fun."

I chewed on the end of my beard as we rode along, and I mused on the matter. I have always been able to recognize Ifrits, but not (I hope) for the reason that my enemies give. My enemies have charged that I myself have a 'wisp of smoke' in my ancestry, that I am partly of the blood of the 'people of the smoke'. I might have become at least a regional caliph had it not been for this rumor against me. But I can see the Ifrits most of the time; and other humans (with no 'smoke' in their ancestry) will hardly see an Ifrit once in a long lifetime.

The Ifrits are spirits, but they are not immortal. They are of the larger family of the *Jinn*, along with the *Marid* who have such acute hearing that they can overhear conversations in the heavens; and the *Shaytam* who are able to cause conflict in the heavens and on the earth and under the earth; and the *Ghuls* who are shapechangers and who eat dead bodies and are incomparably evil. But the Ifrits have all the powers of the *Marid* and the *Shaytam* and the *Ghuls*, and greater powers besides. But to compensate for this, the Ifrits have a weakness that the other Jinns do not have. The Ifrits are simple-minded (stupid really) in spite of their great powers.

As to the other Jinns such as the *Sila*, I do not speak of them at all, and I shudder when I hear their names.

As the Ifrits are the 'People Who Are Not Quite People', so their camels are not quite camels. As the Ifrit are 'people of smoke', so their camels are 'camels of smoke'. The Ifrits however make a point of not being malevolent as are such other Jinns as the *Ghuls* and the *Sila*. When the Ifrits kill a person, it is always an accident. I myself in my diplomatic-and-espionage adventure-voyages in the service of my world Kentauron Mikron have used Ifrit killers; and Ifrit killers have tried to use me and have struck at me through my agents. In my eighth adventure, an Ifrit who had made himself very large (as they are able to do) had come to me with the murdered and mangled body of one of my most competent agents cupped in his two hands as if it were an egg.

"Master Mariner, this one of yours, I had no idea he would break so easily," the huge Ifrit had said. "Master Mariner, my big red heart is aflame with sorrow over this thing. Master Mariner, it was entirely an accident, the same type of accident that might very well happen to you in the next five minutes. There is bad engineering in you people or you would not break so easily. I am absolutely sorry that I have killed this agent of yours by accident. And my sorrow will increase when I kill the next agent of yours by accident, and the next agent after him, and the next agent after him, too."

It is very hard to get ahead of the Ifrits even though they are simple-minded.

"Great Mariner," called out the running boy who had rented our camels to us. "You want to avoid the Baghdad Mirage, do you?" he cried in his golden voice (who do we know with such a golden voice?), "It stands athwart every road, and yet I believe that I know one path by which we may avoid it. It is a path that hardly anybody knows."

"What, what?" the male Ifrit cried out. "We thought you wanted to go to Baghdad Mirage, so we would not have allowed you to enter it. We'd have killed you first. But if you wish to avoid the place, we will oppose you there too. We will *compel* you to ride right into the misty city. And if you try to ride out of it again, it's dead you'll be. There is no way you can escape from us or from the city. Here, here, Mariner, veer your camel not away from the road. It's death for you to leave the road on either side. I can crush your skull with the fingers of one hand, and the skull of your camel with the fingers of the other. And my wife can compress the head of your wife till the eyes pop out of it. Into the Baghdad Mirage you two shall ride, and out of it you shall never come alive!"

"Do be careful, you two," my wife protested. "Whichever way I turn the bottles away from you you still almost blunder into them. It destroys the fun for us if you are trapped too quickly. And once trapped, you know, you are trapped for a thousand million years."

We had been traveling like the very wind, and we had near completed the two hundred miles from Bassorah Rock to Baghdad Mirage. But they were mirage miles. The Ifrits and their Ifrit camels had been throwing shadows of smoke on the sand and rocks as they rode. Shadows of our shadows they were! — for the Ifrits said that they would shadow us like our shadows.

But our own proper shadows had been green-and-sunshine as they raced over the dappled sand and stones. And the shadow of the tirelessly running boy had been pure gold as it sped along over the storied countryside. Who did we know who cast a golden shadow like that?

There was a duality about our ride now, for we were riding through a mirage. There were gaps in the ground as we rode over (the mirage-illusion was not quite complete) and we could see a lower ground beneath it. We were really riding through a low sky. And then we came to edified and constructed greatness. We rode through one of the thousand gates of Baghdad, a great arched gate five hundred feet tall. Nor was it the greatest of the gates. Some of them were so tall that no archer could shoot an arrow all the way down to the ground from the top.

We ascended by glittering paths and avenues to the turrets and towers and battlements of magic Baghdad. Our camels were running on roads that went almost straight up, that sometimes even overturned us; but they were running up the high roads of a Royal Mirage. The stones were mirage stones; the bronze doors were mirage bronze; the towers full of extraordinary people were wraith towers full of happy apparitions. But they did not collapse. The mirage was reinforced with stone and iron and bronze.

"There should be more towers over this way!" the boy with the golden voice cried out. "I command! I command! But the spirits are so slow to fulfill my swift commands! Quickly, quickly, spirits! Nine hundred more towers over this way!"

And, lo, there *were* nine hundred more towers! Who did we know who could do tricks like that?

"I go now," the boy golden-mouthed the words, "but I will be out on the prowl tonight with all my cronies from vasty space. I will tread every steep roof of Baghdad. I will leap the turrets, and dive through the stones into the dungeons. I will ascend the tallest towers and descend into the lowest cellars. I will revel with the best and the worst people of all the worlds all the night long. And every night in Baghdad bides for a thousand hours. Oh, this is the last city I will ever build by magic! But it doesn't have to end."

Who do we know who builds cities by magic?

"Harun!" I cried in my voice that can be heard for a hundred sea-leagues.

"Of course, Master Mariner. Open your eyes, Stormy Petrel! I have more fun being Harun than being anybody else I know."

"Harun Al-Rashid! The Golden Boy!" Grand-Dame Tumblehome called to him. "The City need not end. But do *you* have to end now?"

"Only till dark, Grand Dame. Then I will prowl for a thousand-hour night. Be in the magic streets tonight with the revelers. Look at all the masqueraders, for even the flesh-faces are masks. Look till you come to the Golden Tom-Cat. Ask him. He will know where I am."

Then the Magic Boy Harun disappeared into the golden mist.

And A Taller Town Than Rome

If I had come to Gaea-Earth to find the reborn Golden Boy Harun, why then had the other great spies from the other worlds come here? For they were here. I saw their ships hovering at sky-anchor in a state of beta invisibility. And I had known that they were coming. My own instructions in my under-mind had been welling up into my consciousness.

Everything here had an air of what is metaphored as 'An Arabian Nights Adventure'. How odd, for this really was Arabia of that era, and it certainly promised adventure.

The finding of the Boy Harun was only a cover of my real mission, of course. And each of the other great spies would have a cover nearly as fascinating.

But it happened that my cover-mission and my real mission were inextricably tangled together.

There was weeping in the canebrakes and the broken lands going on for a thousand years at a time. These canebrakes and broken lands were a part of the botanical gardens of Baghdad, but the weeping was older than the well-contrived landscape. So wept the giant-dwarf Dan Cupid. So wept the giant-dwarf Nimrod the mighty hunter.

"Wept over her, carved in stone." it is said of one, and were those limestone tears? "By the Waters of Babylon we sat down and wept," it is recounted again, and Babylon occupied the same site as the Baghdad Mirage. Or "— not turned aside and wept," "I must weep but they are cruel tears," "Weep for Saul who clothed you in scarlet," "— to Hecuba that he should weep for her," "I weep for Adonais," "— in the forest, weeping," "Weeping and gnashing of teeth," "hear the children weeping," "— loves, and weeps, and dies," "my very heart and flesh cry out."

Great Pan wept for his lost youth in Arcadia, and he was an immortal. David wept when he remembered Absalom; Daedalus wept when he remembered Icarus; great blinded Samson wept when he remembered Delilah of the long hair; Apollo wept when he remembered Daphne; a nameless soul wept in Hell when he remembered Lilith and the three golden hairs from her head, not noticing that it was the same *tre file d'ore*, the same three threads of gold that bound him tighter than chains in the bottom of Hell. Great Karl wept when he remembered Roland. Prometheus, Jason, Priam, Charon, Peter, Julian the Apostate, Dionysus all wept in Olive Groves. And one other.

Dives wept in Hell. And Pluto the Lord of Hell wept iron tears.

And there was a weird weeping in the afternoon olive groves of the great botanical gardens of Baghdad Mirage when we came to that place on the east bank of the Tigris river. Those five hundred olive groves were really the heart of the botanical gardens.

This weeping seemed to come from anywhere and everywhere. It was shattering, it was desolating. It was such crying as may be heard in seventh hell.

"Pay it no mind at all," said a green bird who lived in the gardens. "It is a boy king who died here anciently. And what does a boy king have to cry about? We laugh and jibe at his wailing voice which we cannot locate however much we fly about in search of it."

But the eyes of the bird were a-shine with tears and not with laughter or jibing.

We were in the middle of wonders and prodigies wherever we turned. Like all cities built by magic, Baghdad was the seventh city on its site. The magic must grow out of real roots. The seven cities of this sequence were: Babel whose tower had come within two hundred feet of reaching Heaven; Gade: Babylon the Great; Burj Aqarquf; Seleucia; Cispon the Great; and now Baghdad the Great.

Baghdad of the Thousand Gates was certainly a great city inside its great walls. But the greatness of Baghdad overflowed from the royal, classic, central core of the tall-towered

palaces and pagodas, and the joyous gardens and groves, to the one thousand suburbs outside the one thousand gates. Each suburb had an ongoing fair, a stupendous circus that performed night and day forever, and a grand bazaar of whichever of the one thousand great trades or traffics of Baghdad pertained to that suburb. The circuit of the suburbs was a seven-hour camel ride, a three hour-tram ride, or a two-hour taxi ride. In one hundred of the thousand suburbs the bazaar was a slave-market, each one of them featuring choice slaves from one of the realms of Gaea-Earth or from one of three dozen other worlds.

In each of the suburbs there were from fifty to two hundred theatres, and twice that many night clubs. And within the gates of Baghdad itself (in which were allowed no bazaars, fairs, or circuses, save only the Grand Bazaar and the Grand Fair and the Grand Circus), within Baghdad itself were to be found both the highest and the lowest of entertainments and diversions.

In Central Baghdad there were thousands of roof-gardens of the nobility and other opulent people, each with its fountain and its festoons of Babylonian Lanterns. There were numerous clavichord-bars and supper clubs of the middle rich, and there were the at-home salons with their dazzling chatter and queerly nostalgic artiness.

And then there were the low dives. There were the low dives even in the most altitudinous parts of the city, those of the daredevil roof-climbers and tower-scalers, of the turret-freaks and of the steeplejack beggars. And there were also the strange meeting-places of the winged juveniles. Almost every old noble family had a younger member who was winged and who was therefore declared ignoble and an outcast. But these skiey outcasts assembled with other young outcasts (because of the laws, few of the lawless ones lived to be very old) and rioted and reveled. And who would go up there and get them on their crowns and ledges?

And then there were the low dives indeed, in the cellars and cisterns and sewers of Baghdad, and in the sub-cellars and the sub-sewers. We heard rumors that these lowest of low places were often frequented by the Caliph Harun Al-Rashid who said that he was ruler of low places and people as well as the high.

Much of the magic of Baghdad had solidified in the approximately fifty years since it had been built. The realization of the precariousness of the place broke through only now and then when one would see breaks and gaps in the pavements and lawns, and would see great depths and even blue skies below one. But generally it was quite solid and substantial. In another fifty years, people would forget that the construction had been magical rather than material.

It's true that there were anachronisms and anomalies all over the place to betoken its magical origin: the trams, the taxis, the railroads, they did not belong here yet. And these were gradually breaking down for lack of unmagical spare parts. For these anachronisms, the Creating Caliph had surely drawn on other of his childhoods, on Camiroi, on Astrobe, on Dahae, on Kentauron Mikron especially. What made the Kentauron Mikron case special to us was that we (my Dame and I) had known the Caliph during his Kentauron childhood.

The Boy-Caliph had always felt that if he made something by magic in one place and time he should as easily make it in another. But he couldn't, not as easily, not as substantially, not unless the roots of the thing were to be found in the other case also.

He couldn't do all his magics here on Gaea-Earth because this world wasn't ready for them. But with many of them he sure did come close. The Baghdad-Constantinople Railroad is an example of this. Part of it came out of the Caliph's childhood on Astrobe, and part of it from his later childhood on Kentauron Mikron. There had been some wonderful trains in that day before yesterday era on Kentauron Mikron (every world goes through an era of wonderful trains), but Gaea-Earth was not ready for them yet.

This railroad, the pride of the Boy-Caliph, did run from Baghdad *almost* to Constantinople, so a friendly citizen of Baghdad told us. But the Christians of Constantinople would not allow it across the Straits from Asia Minor to their City. For many years now the train had run from Almost-Constantinople to Baghdad, and all its coaches were always full of important people, and all its baggage cars were always crammed with boxes and bales and trunks and shipping crates. This railroad fooled all the common people of the lands that it traversed, and some of them even bought tickets for it and genuinely traveled on it from one station to another. It fooled the camels and it fooled the horses. If one of the locomotives struck an animal of either of those species the locomotive would mangle it and probably kill it. But not a mule. A mule is unbelieving in almost all matters, and the mules of the country around there did not believe in the Baghdad-Constantinople Railroad. The mules would graze

between the tracks of the railroad, and they would stand their ground if a train came. And when the moment of impact arrived, the mules and the train would pass right through each other with no harm done to anybody.

The citizen of Baghdad told us that in his opinion the Boy-Caliph did not completely believe in this one of his own creations. But it was a magnificent thing as it came hooting and clanging along its tracks, all in gala colors and classic shapes, and filled with truly gala people.

So also it was with the tram-cars. My Dame and I took a ride on one of them. It was a fast ride, pleasant, clean; and it got us from one station to another. But it wasn't real.

The walls are said to have been eighty-seven feet in thickness and three hundred and fifty feet in height. They were drawn around the city in the form of an exact square, each side of which was fifteen miles in length, all built of brick cemented together with bitumen. On every side of this great square there were twenty-five gates' (possibly this should have been 'two-hundred-and-fifty gates') 'which were all made of solid brass. From these twenty-five gates the same number of streets ran in lines parallel to the gates on the opposite side of the wall, thus forming fifty streets each fifteen miles long, and one hundred and fifty feet broad. Around these squares stood the houses... high and beautified, towards the streets with all kinds of ornaments. The space within the middle of each square was vacant ground laid out in beautiful gardens.

—*Compendium of History*. Kerney.

—and, lo, it was lofty, strongly fortified, rising high into the air, impenetrable; the height of its walls was eighty cubits, and it had five and twenty gates, none of which would open but by means of some artifice... such was the beauty of construction and architecture of the city... It is named the City of Brass.

—“The City of Brass,” *The Arabian Nights*.

I am a Master Spy by trade, and I am a Master Mariner as cover for my spying, and also as a means of livelihood. But spying is my life and it is the love of my life. I spy always in the service of my world Kentauron Mikron. I know another spy when I meet one, and I have met one within the last half hour. ‘Citizen of Baghdad’ seems to be his code name, but plainly he is not of the City of Baghdad. I do not believe he is of Gaea-Earth. He is from one of the other four of the five worlds, Astrobe, Camiroi, Dahae, or my own Kentauron Mikron. And I should have known him before, unless it is that he is the secret ‘Spy who is behind the Spies’ on one of these worlds. He is not the spy who is behind my own spying for Kentauron Mikron. He is very pleasant and likeable; but all around him there are warning songs: ‘Here there be traps’.

“Your Arabic is quite good,” I told Citizen, “but it is Arabic learned from a learning machine. You will have every one of the thirty-three thousand words that are necessary, and your pronunciation and diction are elegant. But you will not know the word for the rare ‘Yemen Cowbird’, nor the word for the Merv Thistle which is really a rare variety of tumbleweed and no thistle at all, nor the word for the three-year-old black-winged female locust, nor for the Samaritan bed-bug. I will guess that you are not from Gaea-Earth at all. I will guess that you are from Dahae World.”

“You guess wrong,” said ‘Citizen of Baghdad’. “Your own Arabic is good, and it is also learned from a learning machine. Your pronunciation and diction are excellent, but I would not say that they are elegant. Linguistically you and I are alike as two bugs in one skahhulihtau. You would not know the word for the Lesser Sandpiper; nor for the peculiar cramp of the left gluteus muscle that dromedary-riders, but not camel-riders, suffer; nor for the second flow of rosin from the seven-year-old sandalwood tree; nor for Axel’s Rock viper; nor for the ankle-rash that afflicts those who carelessly walk through patches of three-penny wold before the fourteenth day of younua; nor for the lint that gathers in the navels of persons who wear undershirts made from the dog-flax plant, a lint quite different from any other navel lint; nor for the snub of line that a sailor cuts from the short end (but not from the long end) of a rope; nor for the female O’malley’s Louse that has littered thrice. I will guess that you are from Kentauron Mikron and I will be guessing right.”

He had guessed my planet right, of course. And yet it gave me peculiar pleasure to give him all eight of the words which he had said I wouldn’t know. After that we were friends; but

that didn't mean that we'd hesitate to spill each other's blood if the game we were playing called for it.

"And now will you and your wife The Grand-Dame Tumblehome come and have lunch with me at the Club Haz," this 'Citizen of Baghdad' asked me. I was thunderstruck. How had he known the name of my wife? Was it possible that he also knew who I was?

"Certainly we will," said my wife the Grand-Dame. "Certainly we will, Heifritz, if you will first stop by the Club Nimr with us for drinks. The Ruddy Ralphs are rather good there."

We had been in Baghdad less than an hour, so the Club Nimr was the only drinking club in which we had yet acquired membership.

"There is only one Prize Pearl or Extraordinary Case in this region that could have attracted both the Master-Spy-cum-Wife and Master Mariner of Kentauron Mariner, and the Great Master Spy and Master Litterateur Myself of whatever world I come from, as well as nine lesser and inferior but well-known spies," so said the 'Citizen of Baghdad' as we were drinking Ruddy Ralphs with him in the Club Nimr in the waning hours of the afternoon. (We had not gone to the Club Haz or anywhere to lunch.) "The question is," the 'Citizen' went on, "why now? Why now fifty years after he is born?"

"How did you know that this guy's name was Heifritz?" I asked my wife in a low voice.

"He just looks as if his name should be Heifritz," she said. "Is it?"

And then she spoke to the Citizen Heifritz of Baghdad: "Perhaps there has been some change in the status of the Harun. Has there?"

"None recently that I know of," said Citizen Heifritz. "When the forever young Harun came to the throne in the year 164 of the Moslem calendar, he wielded power for only three days, and it was a near disaster. Then his two sons (as you know, Harun is precocious; he sired Al-Amin when he was six years old and Mamun the Great when he was seven), his two sons told him they were taking the power into their own hands, and that he Harun must remain in Baghdad and enjoy his pleasures and treasures, and reign not at all. They declared the Capital of the Realms to be Merv in Central Asia, and Baghdad to be an 'Innocuous Ornament' and the home of the 'Innocuous Caliph-Emeritus Harun Al-Rashid'. The two sons, of course, always seemed much older than their boyish father. But the three day reign of Harun Al-Rashid was twenty-seven years ago. Since then nothing has changed, certainly not the appearance of the Boy Harun. Why have you two and myself and nine lesser or inferior spies all come here this year?"

"Why are you so sure that the other nine spies are lesser or inferior spies?" my wife the Grand-Dame asked him. "And which one do you believe is the most inferior of all of them?"

"I could have spoken of myself and the *ten* lesser or inferior spies, Grand-Dame," the Citizen Heifritz said. "Of himself, Essindibad here is not of the first rank; nor are you, Grand-Dame. But together you seem to have an added dimension. Considering you two as one entity, I place you under the heading 'Reserved Judgement'. And, as to the other nine, I rate them thus:

"First: Alexander of Astrobe, my own kinsman. Him I would trust five-eighths of the way to hell. I'd trust no other person that far.

"Second: Cato of Camaroi, a twit, but a smart twit.

"Third: Adrian the Christian, and his entourage of birds and beasts.

"Fourth: Madam Jingo of whom I know little.

"Fifth: Ali ben Raad of whom I know nothing.

"Sixth: Rex Romae of whom there is nothing to know.

"Seventh: Irene of Cos, a beauty, 'tis said, a defect in a spy.

"Eighth: Qabda or The Fist. A Turk.

"Ninth: The Golden Tom-Cat. Goofy, but lucky.

"That's the bunch of them, probably the best bunch of spies ever working on one single case. All of them will surely rate among the top spies of the universe. Yet only myself am truly distinguished, and only your duad can even win the classification of 'Reserved Judgement'."

I was astonished. I had never even heard of three of those spies, and I carried in my head all the names and pseudonyms and identifying characteristics of the top twenty-thousand spies in the universe. Some of these that Heifritz had named would hardly rate among the top five-hundred; and I did not know Citizen Heifritz at all.

"You do not know me at all, Sindbad?" Citizen Heifritz asked me with an elevation of his remarkable eyebrows. "No, of course I do not read your mind. I use a trick that you taught me

when I studied under you. You taught me a person, taken aback by an untoward turn of events, will often silently vocalize his thoughts for a moment as if to try to verify them and get them under better control. And you also taught me to read mouth and throat to interpret such sub-vocalizations. You were a good teacher, within your limitations, but you never did teach me how to read mouth and throat for unsounded speech in the total dark. I had to teach that to myself. No, of course you don't remember me. You taught me that the perfect spy was one who could extract all the information that a man or group possessed, and then pass on, *leaving no memory of himself behind*. And so I did. I extracted all that you knew, and then I left; and I pulled in the hole after me. For I am the perfect spy, and you are not."

"You are Lawrence Hockfriedrich," I said then, "and you *were* from Dahae World. You were in a class of one hundred students that I instructed for the Kentaureon Foreign Office. The attrition through failure in such classes is very high, usually about seventy percent. And you, Lawrence Hockfriedrich, were of the failed seventy percent of that particular class. The only subject in which you excelled, as I recall, was 'New Choledochokystoi for Old', or 'How Much Gall Should a Spy Be Able to Carry?' "

'New Gall Bladders for Old', yes, I loved that, Sindbad. You were always there with the classy title. And I myself renewed my capacity for sheer gall when I was in your class. I was a little bit timid before that. And I am not necessarily from Dahae World just because my application for your class showed me coming from there. You took only students from the 'Five Worlds' as I recall. The Kentaureon Foreign Office had it set up for those only. I already had some 'Intimations of Gall' when I came to you. I needed gall to claim that I came from one of the five worlds and to forge the papers to prove it. Considering where I *really* come from it took a lot of gall to claim to be a civilized 'Five Worlder'. Well, tootle! The action has now gone elsewhere, and I will go where it is. Don't you wish you could sense these changes in the 'Arena of Action' as well as one of your former students can?"

Citizen Heifritz, who had been only an indifferent spy (except for his gall) when he was quite young, had apparently gained something in competence now that he was quite middleaged. Whether Citizen Heifritz suddenly went where the action now really was I do not know. But he was suddenly gone. I had taught him the 'Quick Decamp' long ago, but he had added a variation that I hadn't taught him. I wonder how he did it?

There was a thunderous ring of bronze-brass that reverberated the whole bedrock that Baghdad reposed upon and also the thin electrum-metal that composed the echoing sky overhead. This low sky was part of the 'mirage illusion' of Baghdad. The rolling booming thunder was, I knew, one of the thousand gates closing down, slamming down firmly. It was the Royal Gate closing, and the jolting thunder of it signaled the Fall of Night. Commoners and small nobles might still come and go by the other nine hundred and ninety-nine gates all night long; but Higher Royalty could only use the Royal Gate, and it was closed.

Or they could go the murderous way over the steep roofs and down the outside of the deadly walls like madman-acrobats. Or they could go through the cellars and sewers and under the walls to the night amusements of the thousand suburbs. They could go through those cellars and sewers if they knew their way through the Master Maze. But it would be a fatal loss of dignity for any really royal person (and eminent off-world persons equated themselves with the royal persons of Baghdad) to use the commoner gates.

A person wearing the mask of a Golden Tom-Cat came into the Club Nimr. Masks might only be worn in Baghdad Mirage after the official fall of night. But after dark it was Maskers' Night every night all night. I knew this man in the cat mask as a minor spy; I knew him from his cat-like walk. But he had never been known as the Golden Tom-Cat, though Citizen Heifritz had called somebody that. The man in the cat-mask did have with him a large, golden (or tortoise-colored) tom-cat. The man rubbed the cat's lips with alum, and the cat moved his mouth and throat as if mouthing words. Then either the man ventriloquized for the cat, or the cat itself uttered the words:

"The Boy-Caliph told you to ask the Golden Tom-Cat where the Caliph might be found this night," the cat said, or the man ventriloquized.

"All right, man or cat, I ask it. Where is the Caliph to be found this night?" I inquired of the two of them.

The cat then rubbed the man's lips with alum, and the man moved his mouth or throat as though mouthing words. And either the man spoke or the cat ventriloquized for him:

"Come and see," the man's voice seemed to say, but I noted that the cat's throat was

vocalizing.

My Dame and I then followed the cat and the man out of the Club Nimr. I had the strong feeling that the cat was the master and that the man was bedazzled and under the cat's control. We went up walls, and up still taller walls.

"It is the *Imtihan*," the cat said (it was clearly the cat talking this time, and the man's voice was no way involved), "it is the test, the examination, the initiation rite. Whoever would enter the Caliph's inner circle must go where the Caliph goes and climb where the Caliph climbs. And he climbs better than a squirrel or a cat. He climbs like a divine boy."

Up steep roofs and still steeper roofs we went (and the slates of Baghdad were proverbially slippery) and onto balconies and balustrades that were more ornament than substance. We came to the very pinnacle of the city (the only light was star-light now) that seemed to be and was within two feet of the local sky. We started over the wall, the highest point of the walls of Baghdad Mirage, but the stones were very slick from the night mist and from the brass-and-gold chasing set into them.

The cat slipped, screamed (but in the moment of its scream, something passed from the cat to the man), and fell. And fell, and fell, turning over and over in the ever darker lower air. It hit and echoed and broke apart on the stones five hundred feet below us.

"You have lost your totem," my Grand-Dame told the cat-man, "and you have lost the meaningful half of your voice. What will you do now?"

"Oh, I'll audition cats until I get another good one, super-intelligent and vocal. That was his ninth-life," said the Man in the Cat Mask. "But I have not lost the meaningful half of my voice. I've taken it back into myself. I am often tormented by assassins, so in tricky situations I bide a while in my cat and let the killers riddle my body if they are canny enough to catch us. And then I go back into my body and make such repairs as are necessary. I would have fallen to my death there if I had been in my proper body. But the cat fell instead, and as he fell I leapt from his body into my own. As you see, I no longer wear a mask. This is my own face you see now."

"It's very little we can see you at all in this dark of night," my Dame said. "But your face looks very much like the mask you had."

"Very like, yes. For I am the Golden Tom-Cat, and now that totem cat is gone forever. I can only hope the next one is as good. And now we go to meet, in his aura of gladness, a Boy-Man who has only seven lives and is now on the seventh of them."

The slippery stones overhung somewhat here at the highest point of these walls, so it was much worse than going down merely sheer walls.

"But we can find the Boy-Caliph only if we go down here," the Golden Tom-Cat said. "The charm won't work in any other place. Oh, the depth below us! Oh, the mortal slipperiness of the stones! Will you lead the way, Master Mariner Sindbad? I'm suddenly overtaken by a deathly fear on this horrifying height."

"So am I," I palpitated. "Oh Saint Periculosus, Patron of Pinnacles and their dangers, sustain us now! I am also overtaken by the deadly fear on this horrifying height."

"Oh, I'll lead the way down," my Good Dame offered cheerfully. "For a slippery descent like this, I just believe that we had better take it head-first."

My wife the Grand-Dame started down the five hundred foot, overhung, slippery wall head-first, and I and the Golden Tom-Cat followed her the same way.

Al-Amin Is Riding

The worst of our afflictions on the way down were the geier or Night Buzzards. They ripped us with their filthy saber-like beaks, then went for our eyes and our thumbs and our great toes (of course we were unshod now, and we used our big toes for gripping). But we descended in spite of them. I noticed that the Golden Tom-Cat had the suction areas on the soles of his feet, as did my Dame and myself. I had never even known that my wife had them. I myself had always been ashamed of having them and had kept them always covered, though I only suspected what they were for. That meant that the Golden Tom-Cat was not from Gaea but from one of the other Five Worlds. This mutation of the suction-sole had never appeared on Gaea (so my briefing and that of my Ship had told me), but it is mentioned (always as a rarity, though now I suspected that it was not as rare as all that) on the other four worlds. Or else the Tom-Cat was from some far world so obscure that the mutation was not listed for it. But we would have fallen to our deaths on the downward climb except for this mutation, and our mutation to our educated big toes.

The second worst affliction on our way down were the vultures who are known as the 'Maw-of-Hell Birds'. These talking birds taunted us with their silly but infuriating rimes such as:

"Fall forever in a well,
Know its bottom is in Hell,"

and they also came at our eyes with their shorter but no less sharp beaks. I am always uncomfortable with talking birds.

And when we were still a hundred feet from what we thought was the bottom of the wall, we three peeled off it like heavy globs of slime and dropped like lead plummets into a well indeed that had been uncovered outside the wall. And then down and down into the murky water we went, powered by the fearful impetus of our fall.

"Deeper and deeper!" my Good Dame called to the other two of us in her ringing voice. I hadn't known that she could call out so clearly under water. It isn't a common human trait. "Deeper and deeper until we find the passage," she called. "There is always a passage right at the bottom of an ensorcelled well."

Red, goggle-eyed fish rolled their big eyes at us, and glowing devil squids fanged us as we went past them. But the devil-squid did provide us with light down there, and without it we'd have been totally lost. But we did find the mouth of the passage, and we entered it. Then we swam (our lungs bursting, of course, but all spies are trained for long underwater swims) through more and yet more murky water for a hundred yards. It was then that we picked up hope, just as our prospects seemed to turn hopeless, with our own weariness and the apparent endlessness of the passage.

A sort of quick-hearted joy began to overcome our fear and gloom. Something happy was ahead of us. Wherever the passage led, there would be happiness at the end of it.

We came to an iron door in our swimming. The Golden Tom-Cat rapped on it in code, and it opened to let us enter a lock. Here we became quite excited and gleeful as the water drained away from us.

"But who are we kidding?" I asked. "No human could have made that climb down the wall nor that swim through the passage."

"It's possible that there are no longer *any* unadulterated human persons left anywhere," the Golden Tom-Cat said. I saw now by the light in the lock that his own flesh-face or flesh-mask was indeed more the face of a cat than of a man. He at least was not unadulteratedly human.

The inner wall of the lock opened and we went through it and into a dim, purple-lighted room. Our excitement and delight grew. The room was full of people, perhaps thousands of them, but we cared for only one of them. Harun was there (in this incarnation his name was

Harun Al-Rashid).

Harun gripped my hands in friendship when I came to him. I howled with pleasurable pain, and the Boy-Caliph howled with laughter. He had always been proud of the strength of his hands. Like Hercules, he had while still in his cradle strangled with his hands huge snakes that were sent to kill him. He had not changed at all. Well, I hadn't known him at first when he was the boy who rented the camels to us, but he always had this trick of being unrecognized when he wished it. He was first of all a trickster. But I surely knew him now.

Fifty years old? Harun? No, there is something wrong with that chronology. There is always something wrong with a Harun chronology. He was about eleven years old. There was also something wrong with the immediate local topography, as was always the case in any room in which Harun presided.

For in that room, in that purplish light (the 'anachronistic light' as Tyrannus Junior called it in his work 'Optics'), the hours of the night did not follow the proper sequence and the parts of the room were not necessarily in any special spatial relationship to each other. The hours double back again and again (and very often one could hear the water boiling and bubbling backwards in the water clocks). They wandered all over the place in curious fashion. ("Wandering Hours of My Night" was playing on a gramophone that used pressed clay records; I didn't know whether the machine was anachronistic or not.) But we were in sheer delight to be most of the time in the presence of the Boy-Caliph, and to be always in the inspired presence of the hundreds of persons who were likewise seized by that delight.

There was a flashback and reminiscence to earlier boyhoods of this transcendent person. There was joyful puzzling and speculation. There were the pieces of the living legend scattered like pearls before swine on the prototypical Baghdad Carpets of the purplish room. (Boy Caliph Harun Al-Rashid had once said that he was Caliph of the Swine also, and many of his strong followers did have the swinish touch.) Oh, the old and always (and usually true) stories that were told about him!

Harun had always been proud of the strength of his hands, yes. Indeed, some of the legendary of the Boy Hercules had attached itself to the Boy Harun Al-Rashid. There were even those who said that Harun had been Hercules in an earlier manifestation. When still in his cradle, enemies had introduced ravening pythons to crush and devour him. But the Golden Boy had strangled the huge snakes to death with his hands, crushing both their bones and their flesh to pulp. Had he done this 'crushing of the snakes' in every one of his childhoods? We felt that he had. We felt that all his childhoods, whenever and wherever they were, were the same childhood, lived simultaneously on his own scale.

There was another theme running through the cradle days of the strong-handed Boy-King, Boy-Emperor, Boy-Messiah, Boy-Caliph. He always had a twin. The Boy-King was never jealous of the twin, but the twin was always jealous, believing that himself should be the Boy-King. So each time that it came about, Harun (in total happiness) had strangled his twin brother to death with his hands to put an end to his quibbling.

Why was everybody always so delighted with this whole business? Why, for that matter, was the mother of the twins so delighted in every case when she came onto her two sons in the cradle and found one of them black in the face and in strangled death and the other one ruddy and pealing with gleeful laughter? Oh, she was delighted in every case just because the affair was so delightful. In other cases it might seem rather sad that one infant son should kill another, but in the special case of Harun it was funny.

And there were the antics and tricks that Harun was playing constantly in that present time, in every present time, in the big room right now, trick after trick, outrageous and cruel tricks if only they weren't so funny. "Really, my love," my Dame said to me, "there is something *funny* about their being so funny. Whence is this illusion of funniness that casts itself over this cruelty and sordidness?" "You are becoming philosophical again, my dear," I chided her. "The tricks are funny because we laugh at them, and we laugh at them because they are funny." "They are so crude," she still protested, "and so unfair, and so — Oh, Oh, Oh, I'll die if I laugh any more. Oh it's funny, funny, funny!"

But honestly there was something dashed peculiar about them seeming so funny. There were the endless variations of the trick with the substance used for toilet-training pet birds. One drop of the substance was poured every week in the special place where the householder wished his birds to go, and thereafter they would go in that one place and no other. But now Harun poured surreptitiously not one but three drops of the magic substance on the bald pate of a nabob who was visiting him from Hindustan. One moment before this, Harun had

announced that one thousand new birds were being let in and that he wanted all the people to notice their interesting behavior. And then the birds burst down; the ceiling was slid back to let them in. Oh, they were beautiful birds, and only a dozen or so of them emptied themselves on the nabob's pate in that first moment. But others followed them and others and still others. And it became funnier and funnier when we realized that three drops of it would cause the one thousand birds to use that place and no other for three weeks. Oh it was funny! And if the nabob near went mad in just three minutes of it, think how mad he would be driven in three weeks!

And then Harun had a huge and furious she-bear let into the big room. The set-up had been whispered to almost everyone except the man on whom the joke was being played. Down in the bear dungeon, the female bear had witnessed (as she was held tightly in chains) a slave kill her three cubs with wanton cruelty. Then the slave came and rubbed his scent on her nose, and she unable to reach him with either claw or teeth. And then the scent of the slave had been transferred to a certain personage in the big room, to a man who was almost certain to respond in a comical manner when the bear came after him. And how she did come after him when she was released!

What a comic chase with the man fleeing everywhere in real fear of his life, unable to hide anywhere, with every door blocked to him by the laughing revelers. The laughter was cloud-capping, and the golden laughter of the Boy-Caliph ran through it all as the leading theme. And I have never heard anything so funny in my life as the gibbering screaming of the doomed man.

The she-bear finally caught the man and got him down and got his head in her mouth. Then she savaged it till he was quite dead, and yet he still twitched as if to get the last bit of humor out of the situation.

The she-bear stood back then and looked at all of us, around and around. She drooped her head then and prowled about looking for a way out. A bear trainer took her out through the bear door, for she might still be dangerous.

"The she-bear is ashamed," my Dame said. "Why aren't all of us ashamed? Really, shouldn't we be getting too mature for such jokes as that? I hope the next joke isn't a mortal one."

"Strangely enough I feel a little bit ashamed myself," I said. "Why?"

Persons had put a donkey-head mask over the head of a rather unsophisticated slave-girl. Then they showed her herself in a bronze mirror.

"Ach!" the girl cried. "My mother always told me I'd turn into a donkey if I was so stubborn. And I left off being stubborn for fear of it until I was taken as a slave. Now I have very much to be stubborn about, and I'll continue to be stubborn, donkey or not. But I don't feel like a donkey. I still feel like a person."

"The opinion of the best philosophers is that donkeys never feel like donkeys," the Boy-Caliph said. "They always feel like persons. That's what makes them so stubborn. But donkey you are, stubborn girl, and you shall be ridden like a donkey."

Ah, they rode the poor girl till she was weary, and then they rode her some more. Various men rode her and whipped her. And perhaps they rode her to death.

Oh yes, the Black Dog was there in the corner, the Black Dog that some people said was the reverse side of the soul of Harun himself. The Black Dog was a premonition of disaster. How could the Black Dog be in a corner of the room when the room had been built round specially to thwart the Black Dog and give him no place to lurk? Well, he was there, or he was marginally there.

Of course there were premonitions of disaster around Harun. There are such premonitions around all elementals. Someday the Sun will fail and sputter out. That is a cause for unease, but not for urgent or immediate unease. So it was with the Golden Boy. There would come a time when he would no more be born again. Ah, but he would be born seven times in all, and seven is such a happy and lucky number that it may really mean some transcendent number such as seventy-times seven. Even so, we do not know which of the births came first and which came later. Some of the more storied births may still be in the future; in foreshadowing legend only and not yet in solid fact. It is only the Black Dog and those of the Legion of the Black Dog who insist that the present childhood is the seventh and last.

And the two 'Old Ones' are another sort of 'Premonition of Disaster'. The two Old Ones

are the huge and hulking sons of Harun Al-Rashid: Al-Amin sired by Harun when he was six years old, and Mamun the Great sired by Harun when he was seven.

"Al-Amin is riding! He is riding here tonight!" the Black Dog barked in the corner of the round room.

"Oh certainly," Harun Al-Rashid the Boy-Caliph agreed. "He will arrive, and I will make him Caliph tonight. I worry that the two of them may not rule in harmony, so I will make the eldest of them the Caliph."

"But that is the end then, or the beginning of the breakdown," someone protested. "If you are no longer Caliph, then what magic thing will you be?"

"I will be whatever is most lucky for me to be," the Boy-Caliph said. "There is no limit to my luck or to my flexibility. I am the man of a thousand masks, of a thousand valid face-masks. I will be whatever happy thing I want to be."

Yes, Harun Al-Rashid was the man of a thousand masks of disguises, but none of them disguised him at all. Every person in the Caliphate recognized him immediately in any or all of them.

"The Boy-Caliph was weeping this afternoon in the Olive Groves," the Black Dog in the corner charged.

"I weep! I deny that I ever wept!" cried the Boy-Caliph with ringing insincerity. But the clown flesh-mask that he was wearing now had, beside the wide gap-tooth grin and a bulbous nose, a heavy dribble of tears at the corner of each happy eye. "I am the Golden Boy. What would I ever have to weep about. Somebody kill the Black Dog!"

"The Black Dog is gloom, and it is the son of Death," the Black Dog said with a heavy and hellish voice. "The Black Dog was born dead and cannot be further killed. Ah, but the Black Dog has recordings of the Boy-Caliph weeping in the Olive Groves today."

"No, no, that was not the weeping of myself," Harun maintained. "There is old, old weeping, residual weeping in the Olive Groves. There one may hear Adam weeping when he remembers Cain, or the Giant Anak weeping when he remembers the daughters of men. Ah, I miss the daughters of men myself when I am dead for a while. But I do not weep when I am in my happy voyage. Myself was the Genie in a bottle for a thousand years. Myself was the 'Thing' in Pandora's box, the 'Thing' that did not fly out when the lid was raised because my wings were broken. But even then I did not weep."

Of what did the Boy-Caliph consist? His flesh was fifty years old in his present life. Nor was he retarded in his functions, for he had sired his first son when he was six years old and his second son when he was seven. But he was eternally boyish; and yet his boyhoods were interrupted by his strange deaths. I had a very good account of his death on Kentauron Mikron, and I had a fair accounts of three other of his deaths. But, in every case, mythological elements had crept into his deaths, or may indeed have been in them as genuine elements when he died.

Was Harun even human? Was he perhaps one of the *Sila* who live a thousand years, or a *Marid* who live a million, or an *Ifrit* who live a thousand million years and who may spend as long as a million years at one time imprisoned in a bottle? (The Ifrits fall for the Bottle Trick every time; they suffer from 'Bottle-Imprisonment Syndrome'.) Was Harun a *Shaytan*? Or even a *Ghul*? No, not that. He hadn't the ravening cruelty of the *Ghul*, though he did have a streak of cruelty in his humor and his antics.

All this time there were old anecdotes and practical jokes being acted out by the Boy-Caliph and his familiars. Some of them had been written down as much as a hundred years earlier, but they had been written by the Comic Prophets out of the ever-unfolding Comic-Glory-That-Was-And-Is-And-Will-Be of Harun the Golden Boy. Well, there was the living tale, or at least the animated tale of the lady who —

Ah, some of us were being put out of the huge dim-purple room then. Perhaps we can come back to the animated tale of the lady who — But none but believers in the Prophet could be present now.

None but believers could be present now when Al-Amin (he had arrived with the sound of ten thousand horses and horsemen somewhere within the walls of Baghdad Mirage itself), when Al-Amin the eldest son of Harun Al-Rashid should be installed as Caliph in the place of his boyish father. The details of the installation might be seen by none but believers' eyes: but a hint of what the installation would consist of might be taken from Harun's collecting one

hundred gallons of Christian blood. My Grand Dame and I belonged to the minority of Christians on Kentaureon Mikron, so we had to contribute. Alexander of Astrobe, one of the Master Spies now in Baghdad Mirage (we had fallen into conversation and friendship with him) belonged to the Militant Christians of his golden world of Astrobe, and he had to contribute. There were about a thousand Christians out of the ten thousand persons in the big room (somehow the ten thousand had been comfortable and leisurely and uncrowded there which meant either that the room was larger than it seemed or that it was composed of 'Mirage Space'), so it was no hardship on us that a hundred gallons of blood would be taken from our number.

"What will you do with it, Harun?" one of us Unbelievers-In-The-Prophet called as we were being pushed out of the room.

"Drink it, of course," Harun called back in his boyish jangle. But the muleteer's flesh-mask that he was wearing now had one great eye winking so were not so sure that our blood really was for drinking.

As we went from the room and into one of the many broad, subterranean streets that ran both below Baghdad and its suburbs, I was shocked to see some three hundred of Al-Amin's horsemen riding, each carrying a freshly-severed human head on the end of a long lance.

Five Eighths Of The Way To Hell

The 'room' into which we unbelievers had been herded was a very large mausoleum or burial crypt, deep under and much older than the walls of Baghdad. "We will just keep you in this place because we may need several of you," one of the Captains of the guards told us. "And we will probably have to come into here for several reasons." But the huge crypt-room had most of the hard amenities, stone benches and stone tables, and even stone bowls filled with stone fruit.

"You ask, Essindibad, and you tell me that my cousin Heifritz also asks 'Whence this gathering of spies?' And I can only say that all the spies, and I and thou also, have heard the distant jangle-music of the belled dragon. Aesop, perhaps, or another, had the fable of the belled cat. Should a mouse be brave enough to tie a bell on a cat, and should the cat be foolish enough to leave the bell hanging around its neck, then all the mice would have warning whenever the cat so much as stirred. Well, a belled dragon does stir whenever the Golden Boy or the Boy-King is about to fulfill his mission, and that belled dragon is stirring now. As to who it was who belled that dragon originally I have no idea; but research may yet turn up the name of the bell-hanger, just as research may yet turn up the name of the 'Song that the Sirens sang'."

It was the Master Spy Alexander of Astrobe talking. My good wife Grand Dame Tumblehome began to doodle words with a stylus on a piece of shoulder bone of a sheep.

The stone table at which several of us were sitting was of highly polished chalcedony or agate stone. A piece of chalcedony as large as that big tabletop was worth all the wealth of a realm. When we looked down at the tabletop, it mirrored our own faces as clearly as a fine glass mirror of Kentauron Mikron might have done might have done — but with a difference. Our mirrored faces changed, and other things changed, apparently following the trend of our thoughts. Sometimes I could gaze into my own face as it was when I was an eleven-year-old boy. Sometimes I could see it when I was an elderly but not yet senile man. I could not see my face when I was still older than that. Either I remained an elderly but not yet senile man for a very long time, or I died at that stage and had no older face. But others at the table, by experimenting, could see themselves as they would be after they were dead, rotted first, and then only as skull faces.

"What the Golden Boy does best is die," Spy Alexander continued. "For that he is born. And born and born and born again. For that he comes into the world. We all of us are born to die, in a certain sense. But the Golden Boy is born to die in a special way. His death is always the main thing about him. It is for his death that the Eagles gather."

"The name of the of the song that the Sirens sang was 'Bide a While'," my good-wife said. "And I have written the first stanza of it here on this shoulder-blade of a sheep for your edification:

'Oh bide a while with us and love
Hotly, fully to the wales.
Empassioned girls have plenty of
Gills and fins and fishy tails.' "

Spy alexander looked doubtfully, even distastefully at my good-wife. "I love first rate and structured code," he said. "But I hate such unstructured and amateurish code as that. It is not really playing the game to use it. Cannot you tell us, Grand-Dame Tumblehome, in easy words what you are trying to say? Cannot you give me the message directly?"

"No, I cannot," my good-wife said. "The *message*? Oh no, the message is too intricate to

give in easy words. You must work for it. In any case, 'The Song the Sirens Sang' has nothing to do with any message. I asked the polished stone table (in my own way I asked it) to give me part of the Song the Sirens Sang, and it flashed it up at me and I copied it on the sheep-bone. So it wasn't a great song! What do you expect from a bunch of ocean gamins?"

A few hundred guards rode into the mausoleum on horseback.

"We miscounted," one of their captains said. "We need nine more human heads, imposing ones preferred. You, sir," he was speaking to Master Spy Alexander of Astrobe, "you have the sort of imposing head that I mean. We will have to take it with us. It'll bring up the average. We are sorry to inconvenience you, but yours is really a prime head."

"Oh no, mine is not an imposing head at all," Spy Alexander protested. "Notice how my upper lip pouches out. It makes me look like a rock coney, utterly without distinction."

"Yes, so it does. I didn't notice your upper lip pouched out like that before. Oh well, keep your head. We'll find what we need somewhere."

And another Captain of Horsemen said to my good-wife: "You madame, you barefaced unbeliever that you are, you have a very distinguished head. I have seldom seen such a distinguished head on a woman. We'll use it."

My wife does indeed have a distinguished and beautiful head and face. But she protested the matter:

"No, my head is not distinguished at all. It is too fat, too heavy. It looks like the head of a dame hippopotamus."

"It does, yes," the Captain agreed thoughtfully. "I didn't notice that before. Well, we'll find what we need somewhere."

The Horsemen then beheaded eighteen persons in our crypt-room. They selected the nine most imposing heads from the eighteen and gave the other nine with all eighteen bodies to the dogs. They selected well, for the nine heads they stuck on the ends of their long lances and rode away with were indeed imposing. But we had the feeling that the new regime in the Caliphate might prove to be an oppressive one.

"Of the series of Golden Boys, of which Harun Al-Rashid seems to be a recurring unit in several but probably not all of the chains, I will say that they are pseudo-Golden-Boys," Spy Alexander was continuing his discourse. And yet he seemed a little bit shaken by the near encounter he'd had with his head. Ah well, spies are taught to keep their heads at all times. "Only one of them was the Golden Boy, the Boy-King; but he was imitated both before and after the fact by these lines of pleasant imposters. The swift and sudden pleasures encountered by all persons in the presence of the pseudo-Golden-Boys is bait; and we are the fish who take it. I believe that all of them stem from hell. But here I must impose something that strains my Christian faith. For we militant Christians of Astrobe believe in only one hell. But the Moslems of Gaea-Earth, and other persons on other worlds, subscribe to from seven to nine hells. I believe that the fakery of the Golden-Boy-lines stems from one of the usually easy-going hells of the Moslems. It is evil, of course, and it is set in the direction of ultimate evil. But it will hardly arrive at that ultimate in this aeon, and probably not in the next.

"The Golden Boys have no adult form, not the pseudo ones, not even the True One. Christ Himself of Gaea-Earth was not made man: he was made boy. And as a Boy, but perhaps under the appearance of a Man, he was executed, with a fantastically powerful recoil that shook Gaea in root and branch. The Lords of a more easy-going hell believe that they can ape this great redemptive recoil: and they shoot their bolts, their Golden-Boy arrows, one after the other. There it is, Essindibad and his good wife! If you have followed me this far, you have followed me five-eighths of the way to hell. Do you think you might follow me a little bit further?"

There was the sound, or the feel, of ten thousand intaking breaths. It was so massive that it caused the atmospheric pressure of the whole crypt to fall suddenly. "Whatever it is, it will be a lulu," my good-wife said. "Cover your ears, guys. This'll be a blast."

The soil of several of the ancient graves began to move and jerk in anticipation. A shiver ran through the thousands of sets of bones buried under our feet and all around us. The dead, like canaries and mice, are early detectors of catastrophic atmospheric changes.

Then it came. Oh, it was only the blast of ten thousand trumpets sounding loudly together. We had covered our ears, but now we felt the blood running out from between our fingers. And yet the trumpet tune, when separated from its too-loudness, was a rather spirited

and pleasant little call. The name of the call was "Wake the Town and Tell the People," and this was only the fifth time it had ever been sounded.

The first of the Abbasid Caliphs had not been blown into power by this trumpet blast. He, Abu-l-Abbas el-Saffah, had composed the tune in the fourth and last year of his reign, and it was blown for subsequent Caliphs. For the news of "Wake the Town and Tell the People" was that there was a new Caliph.

When the tune was blown, the soil of three of the ancient graves moved and jerked still more; and mummified members began to push through that soil. But they'd never make it out that way.

Then a determined and solitary trumpeteer came into our mausoleum room. "We need three dead men in good condition to witness and attest the installation of the new Caliph," the lone trumpeteer declared resolutely. "Three dead men in good condition," he repeated, "and I believe I know just which plots they occupy."

The lone trumpeteer blew successively at each of the three plots. He blew furiously, mountainously, mortally. And three very shabby men, with that shabbiness that is achieved only by spending many years in the grave, three very shabby men broke out of the ground and stood quaking and miserable.

"Walk in loose-step, but walk briskly," the lone trumpeteer ordered them. And then he jazzed them on their way with further spirited trumpeting. So the new Caliph would have three men, risen from the dead, to attest to his installation. Things like that are important in a monarchy.

"I do not believe that Harun Al-Rashid is of the human species," Master Spy Alexander of Astrobe was saying. "I was about to say that I do not believe he is *entirely* of the human species, but I caught myself in time. In the three days I have been here, I have begun to fall into the speech patterns and thought patterns of the people of Gaea. A person, I believe, is entirely human; or he is entirely unhuman. I must not wobble on the matter. Thence, Harun is entirely unhuman, though it hard to accept."

Why did it give me an uneasy feeling when I heard Alexander the Spy say this? The rumor that I had a 'touch of smoke', a touch of the Ifrit, in my own ancestry was only a rumor. But I thought Spy Alexander was wrong in his 'all-or-nothing' thesis.

"The Harun is really a golden animal," Spy Alexander was talking. "Either that, or he is some species of angel, which is even harder to accept. But I do not go along with those who say that this unhuman creature is not a creature of God. All creatures are ultimately Creatures of God, even this Golden Mock-God Boy. And every creature of God has the possibility of Good. So has this Boy-Caliph who is in the process of becoming an ex-Caliph. He has the possibility of good, but he has the actuality of evil. Harun is a pawn that the Satanic Majesty pushes forward in the game again and again. Again and again this privileged pawn is demolished, but is it possible that the Satanic Majesty gains in position every time this special pawn is destroyed?"

"Let us talk a little bit about the various brutal deaths of this Harun. A pleasant legend has been designed to cover every one of them, but I believe the facts themselves are grindingly unpleasant. Why is it absolutely imperative that this Golden Boy should be murdered again and again? Why in every case does *he* manipulate it so as to leave no choice in the matter? Why, in short, does he opt for being murdered? Why is the brutality of the necessary execution so emphasized and highlighted? Why is the era and the culture in which the necessary obliteration takes place always so maligned? Why is it so bad-mouthed forever and ever? The world, whatever world it is in the particular case, has always a maniac compulsion to put itself in the wrong in this matter, just as Harun has a maniac compulsion to get himself grotesquely killed in this matter.

"What about the wonderful aura of happiness with which Harun always surrounds himself?" I asked.

"He's got it, he's got it!" Alexander of Astrobe cried. "What else can I say except that he's got it?"

"But the sweep of it is many miles wide, realm-wide, sometimes world-wide," I expostulated.

"Yes, yes, I know. And yet I believe that it's only his body chemistry or alchemy. That is one reason that I believe he's a non-human creature. Humans never have bodies that are hundreds of miles in extent. But some species of Ifrit do apparently have such bodies. I

believe that he is a very, very large Ifrit under the appearance of a very small man. Yes, I know that it sounds extreme, Essindibad. Well, it's only a working theory."

"An eclipse, an eclipse!" cried a man who entered our place, a man who seemed to belong to the new Al-Amin officialdom. "There must be an eclipse of the sun to correspond to every installation of a Caliph. One planner has said that we need an eclipse to convince and impress the ignorant, but this is false. We need an eclipse to convince and impress the three-quarters educated. The ignorant do not care at all whether a shadow that darkens the sun is natural, or contrived, or merely unusual. But we do need an eclipse."

"There has been an eclipse for the installation of each Caliph of the present dynasty. And the installation dates were *not* selected to coincide with an eclipse. The installations were mostly by impulse and quick overthrow. How the eclipses happened to fall on Installation Day in the earlier cases I do not know, but it *has* to happen tomorrow. Spies are supposed to be smart, so I am putting this problem to several of you. We will need the eclipse in the morning, sometime after the sun is high."

"I always know what eclipses are scheduled on my own world," Spy Alexander said. "But I don't know them for Gaea-Earth. Do your astronomers know whether there is an eclipse scheduled?"

"Our astronomers all skipped before we knew what they were up to," the official said. "They remarked, with that hazy look in their eyes that all astronomers have, 'Our luck has stretched too far already'. So now I turn to you spies. If there isn't an eclipse tomorrow before noon, the bunch of you will hang. Nobody ever got a more just deal than that. You, Alexander! You, Essindibad! You, Grand-Dame Tumblehome! You, Golden Tom-Cat! You, Ali ben Raad the Son of Thunder! And probably you, Azraq-Qamar the Blue Moon. We really should have a seventh one to hang with you. There will be seven hanging gibbets, so we will be hanging people in lots of seven for the celebration. But we won't hang any of your bunch if there *is* an eclipse tomorrow. We'll likely just give each of you the ritual thirty-nine lashes with the scourge-whips and then release you with a lecture of the perils of being a spy."

"I have a little book 'How to Predict an Eclipse' at home," Ali ben Raad the Son of Thunder said. "It was the come-on offering of the 'Science-for-Boys Book of the Month Club' offering. But I don't have it with me in this time and place, and I don't think the predictive data are all available."

"Will a partial eclipse do it?" I asked.

"It must be a very substantial eclipse, Essindibad," the official said. "Oh, anything over ninety percent will probably do. Spies have the reputation of being able to think very fast when they're in dire peril. Little Spies, you're in dire peril now."

"What is the totem-bird of the new Caliph Al-Amin?" my good-wife asked the official.

"The wild Mud-Goose, sometimes called the Two-River Goose."

"Perfect, perfect, oh, oh, perfect!" my good-wife gushed.

"Al-Amin is a sort of Wild Goose himself," the official said. "Well, I must get back to work. I must get back to the revels. Here is a whirligig noisemaker for each of you. Just whirl them around your heads and they'll make noises."

The official left us then. We didn't seem to be under too tight restraint. We wandered pretty much where we would. We feasted on roast camel hump and on Persian walnuts. We ate millet bread and sesame cake. We drank the new drink 'Coffee' from Kurdistan.

"What was the bit about it being 'Perfect, perfect, oh, oh, perfect' that the Wild Mud-Goose is the totem bird of the new Caliph Al-Amin?" I asked my wife.

"Sindie, who is the Emperor of all the Wild Mud-Geese in the world?"

"It's the Mud-Goose that's a million times bigger than any other mud-goose in the world," I explained with my unflinching patience. "It's the mud-goose that takes elephants in a single bite. It's the 'Great Speckled Bird' itself, the Roc."

"And what did the Roc say to you at the close of your second Voyage-Adventure, Sindie?"

"He said, 'If I can ever do you a favor, Essindibad, just let me know.' That's what he said."

"Sindie, another name for the Mud-Goose is the 'Courier Bird'. It delivers quickly and at great distance any message that is entrusted to it, and it always finds the person to whom the message is addressed. Surely a Courier Bird would be able to take a message to its own Emperor. Write a message to the Roc, Sindie, and I'll go out and look for a Wild Mud-Goose."

"What will I write to the Roc?"

“Maybe you'll think of something, Sindie,”

Oh, the lights of that party night! Greek fire poured out of buckets to run along the ground like snakes! Babylonian Lanterns full of burning naphtha! Gopherwood torches! Whale-Oil Lamps!

Oh, the sounds of the party night! The singing of the Coelo-Syria Slave Girls! The booming of the rhinoceros-skin drums from the Sudan! The squawking of a Wild Mud-Goose that had just come in with my good-wife and that seemed to be an extraordinarily good friend of hers! The squeaking of the gazelle-skin boots of the ‘River-Boat Dancers’! The rattling of Mongolian firecrackers! The ringing of the bronze hammers of the carpenters building the seven hanging gibbets!

Mamun The Great Is Riding

"Mamun the Great is Riding!" The rumor ran like rats in the walls all through the Baghdad Mirage.

"This may be the shortest Caliph-Reign on record," Citizen-Spy Heifritz spoke with throaty excitement. "Mamun rides like the hot desert wind itself, two hundred, three hundred miles a day if he can get horses. And even wild horses come to his whistle."

Citizen-Spy Heifritz was in our company again. Maybe he believed that the arena of action was now around us since we were the ones whose necks were in the nooses if there was no eclipse this morning. And the water clocks showed that it was already technically morning.

"If we put in a bad word for you, Heifritz, we can likely get you included in our group," my Grand-Dame Tumblehome guyed that guy. "They like to hang them in sevens, you know. And so far they have selected only six of us. But is it certain that Mamun the Great will destroy his brother Al-Amin? Al-Amin killed nine swordsmen sparring partners in a row during the night just past. He is a lightning-like swordsman."

"Tis said that the younger brother Mamun the Great is himself a fair swordsman," Citizen-Spy Heifritz argued. "Mamun is the luckier in everything. And 'tis said that Mamun will only go for a sure thing. And he's sure that he can kill his brother and become Caliph in his place."

"But they have ruled jointly for many years and have not fought," the Golden Tom-Cat stated.

"They have ruled jointly, at a distance," said Madam Jingo the Spy of whom the rest of us knew very little. "Al-Amin has been on the Christian Frontier, strengthening the Damascus region and getting ready to besiege Constantinople the Great. And Mamun the Great has been in Central Asia at the Capital of the Caliphate, the City Merv, which has mirage aspects almost equal to those of Baghdad here. Mamun has been seeking to enlarge the Caliphate all the way to China. There can be two royal Master Generals battling for the Caliphate on opposite frontiers, but there can be only one Caliph. Harun Al-Rashid, a much less important person than either of his sons, has been that Caliph in name. And in this case that has made all the difference."

We spies were probably not much smarter than other people, but each of us had several added dimensions that more common people lacked. Without exception, we had lived on more worlds than one, and had lived in more centuries (both past and future) than the one we were in. We had all lived under more names than one — "and, like the God of the Christians, we are each more persons than one," the Spy Irene of Cos said. This might seem like a little thing, but such multiplicity of person does give one breadth and scope.

"I'm not sure that I welcome another 'Installation of a Caliph' tomorrow even if we all survive the Installation today," continued Irene of Cos, an indifferent spy and a great beauty, which latter attribute may be a defect in a spy. "Another day stuffing on roast camel hump, another day chewing that millet bread, another day watching ten thousand little fat dancing girls shuffle around to the beat of rhinoceros-skin drums, another day drinking that new 'coffee' from Kurdistan which looks like and tastes like muddy water (at least we had wine when we were still Christians), another eclipse to come up with even if by some giant-winged miracle we come up with one today. Gah!"

"Oddly enough, there *will* be a total eclipse tomorrow," said the Master Spy Qabda the Fist, a Turk. "But an eclipse tomorrow will not help the situation today when seven spies or consorts will be hanged if the sun is not eclipsed. Ali ben Raad, Son of Thunder and fuzz-faced boy who is still beardless, you are a close friend of Harun Al-Rashid the boy-Caliph. It really

seems as if each of you could pick more interesting friends. But cannot you get him to shift the hanging of several spy-types to some other types? A thing like this gets all of us in the necks.”

“I don't think so, Fist, no,” the Son of Thunder said. “Harun says that eclipses are important and that the identities of those who are hanged are less important. He says that it does not matter whether even a hundred of his personal friends are hanged, since everyone in the Caliphate is his friend if they ever come to know him, and since he has the talent for making all the friends he wants. He says that there must be eclipses on *three* successive days: *today*, for the installation of his first son as Caliph; *tomorrow*, for the installation of his second son as Caliph, following the death of his first son; and *after-morrow*, for his own (Harun Al-Rashid's) bloody death by mob murder. He says that all the rituals must be fulfilled, and that we should be proud of being hanged at such celebrations, rather than fearful.”

Adrian the Christian (with his strange entourage of birds and beasts) was a Master Historian. He used his activities as a Master Historian as a cloak to cover his activities as a Master Spy. It would seem that his being burdened with all those birds and animals would be an impediment to his going into unusual places and garnering unusual information. He says, however, that the scales tilt heavily in favor of the advantages. He has had very close rapport with his feathery and hairy friends, and their views of history often act as a corrective to his own views: they give him points-of-view that he would never have had without such associates. And even in the gathering of raw information some aspects of the menage that he travels with do work to his advantage. He has, for instance, a saw-billed macaw bird that can cut its way into all sorts of locked and warded places and can steal key documents and fly with them back to Adrian. And he has a Malayan Parrot that is a speed reader of particular discernment. It can go to interesting places, speed-read a few samples here and there, and then put its hooked nib right into the middle of the crucial information. It can speed-read all of it, memorize it, and later recite it back to Adrian (or to a recorder) by the hour.

And Adrian didn't have to worry about uninvited guests in whatever cave he holed up in with his ‘special’ (‘special’ means ‘of various species’) family. He had a young male lion of frightening speed and power who could put the big fear into all intruders. But this sometimes ravening lion (a millennial beast if ever there was one) was as many-faceted as the other specimens in the menagerie. He would lie down with the lamb, and he would eat thistle-hay with it too. It was to him like catnip. He'd eat a lot of hay when Adrian had him on exhibition before visitors. And yet he seemed to get as much live meat in his diet as a young growing lion should eat; and some of it had been wearing shoes.

Adrian had all the Aesopian birds and beasts, and others besides. And several of them could talk in all three of the tongues of the world, Low Latin, Koine Greek, and Arabic.

“We do have a happy home-life together,” Adrian was wont to say (and the hyena always broke into hysterical laughter about then), “except for the hyena who suffers from guilt feelings.”

Adrian asked us if we wanted to come with him when he interviewed the ‘Last Magi’ who had arrived before the walls of Baghdad that very morning. Some of us did go with Adrian to the interview; and we found an old man who talked entertainingly about everything.

“There is nothing magic about me,” the old man said, “though the words ‘magic’ and ‘magi’ and ‘magus’ are etymologically connected. There have always been eight of us Magi, not three; and our names are Gaspar, Melchior, Balthasar, Larvandad, Hormisdad, Gushnasaph, Kagba, and Badadilma. I'm the last of these, Badadilma. Badadilma the Armenian. And I am also the youngest of the pack. We were born into the world to visit and authenticate instances of the births of ‘Golden Boys’, the True One, and the fraudulent ones also. There is only one true Golden Boy, and we authenticated him both as to his Birth, and also as to his Bloody Death some years later. But there are many fraudulent Golden Boys. The most persistent of the recurring Golden Boys is the Harun Manifestation. We must check out every case, because we are still waiting for the Second Birth, for the Second Coming of the Genuine Golden Boy. The Great One-And-Only Golden Boy will be born again, but he will not die again.”

“I know the voice of that Magi very, very well,” said the Master Spy Ali ben Raad, the Son of Thunder. “But how is that possible? Who is he when he isn't being a Magi? I have heard his voice from a fresh-water ark-shell. Why should he choose an ark-shell for his habitation?”

"We witness the deaths as well as the births of the fraudulent Golden Boys in order to catch the essential animal that escapes from the body at each of those deaths, an animal sometimes merely trivial, but more often malodorous and evil," the Magi was continuing. "I am here to witness and authenticate the death of the fraudulent Golden Boy Harun al-Rashid; and I'll capture, if I'm able to do it, the essential animal that will escape from the last and smelliest piece of the scattered body. The generic name of this animal is 'The Last Agony Animal'.

"I've had a very long and very happy life. I am no more wise than I am magic; though my classification name 'magi' conveys both wisdom and magic. And yet I *have* picked up a few wise bits in my centuries. I have been blessed in many things. I have walked my days in the Sunlight of God, and I have been given happy judgement. I now live out my middle centuries (we Magi are quite long-lived) in the high mountains of Armenia, the land anciently named Haik. Your animals recognize me, Adrian. And I have my own entourage of birds and beasts on the mountain.

"Every high mountain in Armenia has an ancient wooden castle on it, a castle built of gopher wood, a very little bit below the crest, at the head of the highest valley or gash in the mountain. These old castles have all been ice-locked for four or five hundred years, since the chill time returned to these high places. But my own wooden castle is unique, for it once sailed on the breast of the wide world-ocean. My gopher wood castle is the Ark itself, the Ark of Noe or Noah.

"I will tell you this. The Ark was never simple and bare and functional. It was ornate, art-worthy, and somewhat luxurious. All the Beasts of the Earth rode on the Ark; but it also carried other passengers, such as Ritual, Ancient Liturgy, Kingliness, Holiness, and all the Prerequisites of Holiness. It carried all the high things from the Old World. The low things were light and could float on the flotsam.

"Adrian, Master Historian as well as Master Spy, I invite you to visit me in the Holy Ark on the Holy Mountain. There is an easy way up there, going through the caves that are in the interior of the mountain, warm with remnant igneosity and protected from the high winds. You will find deep history in the old Ark; and you will also espy such evidence as spy dramas are compounded from. All the interior walls of the Ark are covered with paintings that can only be described as astonishing, incredible, inspired by the artistic genius as it was in the Morning of the World. Some of the paintings are signed by Melchisedech, the ancient of the ancients. Yes, he still lives somewhere, but I have not now heard from him for a score of years. Some were signed by Noe, and by his sons, and by one daughter-in-law whose name was 'Increase', and by one male slave of Shem. Yes, there were several slaves on the Ark. How else would the ambiguous and often fruitful institution of slavery have been preserved for the future world if there had been no slaves on the Ark? Scripture says that Noe went into the Ark with all his household, which included Noe's grandfather Matusalem as well as several slaves. There were also paintings that were extraordinary even in their ineptitude: beautiful, weird, overflowing, demented, or half-witted, enchanting. These were signed by three different apes of three different sorts, two of them African and one of them Asian. Ah, if only apes could still paint like that! — you will exclaim when you see their work. As a matter of fact, I have an ape companion presently, and he can still paint like that. He's very good.

"Yes, Matusalem, the grandfather of Noe, usually accounted the oldest man who ever lived (but he was only the oldest man who ever died), he was on the Ark. And he's still there. His body is incorrupt, though somewhat dried up and mummified. He must have died before the Ark landed, or he would have been buried on land. But there is still reflex movement and reflex life in his body. He sits at a wooden table with a never fail pen in his hand and a large parchment before him. He still writes, but very slowly, one character or letter a year. You must watch for a week to see that his hand has moved at all. In the seven hundred years that I myself have lived in the Ark, the noble old dead man has added seven hundred characters to his ongoing 'Secret History of the World'. The contributions that I have watched coming from his very slow pen now add up to more than two hundred very interesting words.

"Ah, a question from the spy in the Tom-Cat mask? Oh, that is your own face and not the mask. But the mask you sometimes wear over your face is hardly to be distinguished from it? You ask about grapes. Yes, by special dispensation, grapes do grow clear to the top of my mountain; and I drink my pleasant gallon of holy wine every day. A question from the overly-beautiful Spy, Irene of Cos? No, there is not any error in the Scriptural description of my mountain as being the tallest mountain in the world. So it was tallest then in the days of the

Flood; and so it has ceased to be now in these latter days. For the Himalay Mountains of Hindustan have been rising ever higher for the many centuries since that time, and now they are much taller. One of the things I miss from the old world before the Flood is Geology. Only scraps of it were brought forward in the Ark, and I believe the old geology would be a very interesting subject, if only we possessed it.

"A question from Ali ben Raad, the boyish Son of Thunder? No, I cannot attest either for or against the legend that Magog, or some other giant, rode out the flood astraddle the ridge-roof of the Ark. Magog was an Ifrit-Giant, so he could have been any size he wished, up to a mile in height. He would hardly have drowned, for surely there were many places on Earth where the water was less than a mile in depth. He wouldn't have starved, for Ifrit-Giants can go as long as a hundred thousand years without food or drink. He may have ridden on the Ark now and then just for the fun of it, and indeed there are marks deep in the gopher-wood of the roof as though giant heels had kicked it for pleasure and fun. And yet most of the Ifrit-Giants did not survive the Flood. Only one of the ninety-nine species of them survived it, and that was a very degenerate species. Rather odd.

"A question from Master Mariner and Master Spy Essindibad Copperbottom, better known as Sindbad the Sailor? 'Can I *make* an eclipse?' I don't know. I suppose I could have one made, if I wished to trouble Almighty God about such a trifle. But then if He granted me such a silly favor as this, He might not be so ready to grant me something I really needed in a future moment of trouble. In any case, it would take a Faith tall enough to reach into the very Heavens, and I'm not sure that mine is tall enough. But I understand that you have already solved that problem through your friendship with an Ifrit-Bird which can make itself as big as it wished: the Roc or Ruoch Bird. It struck me as a rather clever solution that you came up with, and you have never shown many signs of being clever before. Indeed, the word is that you are a fellow with only one oar in the water, and that you used a ghost writer to do your popular 'voyage-adventures'. The Roc-eclipse would be worth seeing, but I'm afraid we can't see it here this far from the city walls. The angle would be wrong, and even the Roc cannot make itself to be *that* big. I suggest that you go back inside the city to watch it happen. You will be able to watch it with the high personages of the City and the Caliphate from one of the tallest parts of the walls, that part that is called 'The Wall of the Gibbets'."

And that is what we did. We went back into the city to watch the eclipse. But I was puzzled as to why the Magus Badadilma had spoken of *me* having a rather clever solution to the eclipse-problem, when I had no solution to it at all. In the city, we ascended to the high place known as the 'High Place of the Hanging Gibbets'.

"The Magus seems to give verification to somebody who never really happened," said the Master Spy named Rex Romae or the King of Rome, he of whom Citizen-Spy Heifritz had said that there was nothing to know. This speech of Rex was just as we had arrived at the High Place of the Hanging Gibbets. "I mean, of course, Harun al-Rashid. He never happened, though I see him standing there. Al-Amin and Mamun the Great were the sons of the Caliph Al-Mahdi. Al-Mahdi had no son named Harun. He did have a son named Al-Hadi. The father appointed Al-Hadi to be Caliph when he (the father Al-Mahdi) wished to abdicate and become a monk. But Al-Hadi died or was murdered within a year. Al-Mahdi then appointed his two younger sons, Al-Amin and Mamun the Great both to be Caliphs, the one in the Western and Southern parts of the Caliphate, the other in the Northern and Eastern parts. Now the two brother-Caliphs are on a collision course. But Harun al-Rashid is the name of a fictional character, and he never lived at all. The business of him having one son when he was six years old and one when he was seven is fiction and not fact."

"Then who is that boyish middle-aged Caliph standing there?" the Master Spy Cato of Camiroi asked the Master Spy Rex Romae.

"I don't know, Cato. But the Harun standing there is plainly a secondary manifestation. And the primary of him, as I have discovered by very sophisticated deduction, is one of us Master Spies here. But which, which, which one of us?"

It gave me a funny feeling to hear that one of us spies was secretly Harun Al-Rashid. And I am not sure that I believed it completely.

Then, as we stood in that high place on the wall, guards came and took hold of seven of us: Alexander of Astrobe, Myself Essindibad, my Wife the Grand-Dame, the Golden Tom-Cat, Ali ben Raad the Son of Thunder, Azraq-Qamar the lady known as Blue Moon, and Cato of Camiroi, a twit but a smart twit. We had seven nooses slipped over our necks by the guards.

We would be hanged by our necks until we were dead, unless there was an eclipse. And if there was an eclipse, then some other group of seven would take our places and be hanged instead of us. There were twelve sets of seven persons each waiting to be hanged, so there were enough of them to make it a good show with or without us spies.

"Seven, or seventy-times-seven, or seven-times-one-hundred-thousand, I'll keep on hanging them till I get my eclipse," said the new Caliph Al-Amin. "Time is about up for you, Spies; unless you espy an eclipse winging its way towards the sun pretty rapidly. Rope-men, look to your ropes!"

"Wait, wait!" I cried. "I do see a sort of eclipse winging its way towards the sun." And I did see something. It was still hardly more than a dot in the distant sky, but I recognized the shape and motion of it as that of an old friend. It was the Roc. I knew that it could make itself larger or smaller. I knew that it could swallow an elephant in a single bite. I knew that it had talents for impersonation; but even then I didn't believe that it could impersonate an eclipse. But it had always been a good-luck bird to me. I hoped that it might swoop down and kill a few of the guards and carry a few of us spies to safety.

But then the Roc set itself directly in the way of the sun and began to grow larger and larger. It became so large that it obscured the late morning sun completely. And darkness covered the whole City of Baghdad, suddenly and entirely.

"Torches, torches, torches!" came the strong voice of the New Caliph Al-Amin. "Torches, torches, glorious torches for my glorious reign! Now I have my eclipse! Now I am Caliph indeed! The sun and the skies testify to my new and glorious reign. What, what, what is it that I keep hearing in my moment of triumph? Horse hoof-beats, hoof-beats, hoof-beats! Muffle them, please, somebody! They distract me! Yes, yes, beautiful torches, strength tried in fire and blaze! How long will the eclipse last, Sindbad? Oh, what is that fearful and painful beating of horses' hooves in my head? How long will the eclipse last? It has already paid homage to me. Now I want light!"

I had a sudden inspiration. My friend, the Roc Bird who had such astonishing powers, was talking in my head. And I knew that he would be able to hear me when I talked to him.

"Great Caliph, Al-Amin!" I cried. "The eclipse will end whenever you want it to end; for you have become lord of eclipses also. I myself have a Sky-Connection. Tell me when you want the eclipse to end, and I will tell the Sky. And it will end then."

"Who is that? You, Sindbad the Sailor? You have a Sky-Connection?" the new Caliph cried out in amazement. "Do you really have such power and connection? I'll make you my Vizir at least. Take the nooses off the necks of all the spies, guards. You really can do it, Sindbad? I can cry out 'One, Two, Three, Vanish!', and the eclipse will vanish and the sun will shine again?"

"Oh absolutely!" I said bravely; and in my mind I spoke to the Roc: "Fail me not now, my friend. You understand the situation. Fail me not now!"

"I'll not fail you," the Roc answered in my head. "I'm at ready."

"One, Two," the new Caliph Al-Amin began in his ponderous voice. "Oh, what horrible hoof-beats are pounding in my head! Perhaps they'll cease when the dark ceases. Three! Vanish, Eclipse!"

The Roc diminished himself instantly, and the sun shone the brightest that I ever saw it. It seemed to explode with light. And hardly anybody noticed the winged dot that came out of the sun three miles away from us and flew towards the south where birds are birds and elephants make a single bite for them.

Our new Caliph stood and laughed in his noontime glory. He was the most powerful Caliph ever. He had not a trouble in the world, except for those horse-hoofs galloping, galloping in his head.

But the brother of our new Caliph Al-Amin, the brother named Mamun the Great, was riding, riding, riding towards Baghdad with murder in his heart.

I Am A Simple Kid

There are peculiarities to my thirteenth voyage-adventure that I am not able to explain. But it really seems as though the adventure were happening at the same time to somebody else and to me (both the personal and interior part of the adventure as well as the exterior part). It seems that it is happening more intensely to that somebody else (once, things used to happen so intensely to me), with more numerous and more florid details, details which I do not always recognize at all. Somebody else is having my experiences and having them more fully than I am having them. Somebody else is dreaming my dreams, and dreaming them more extensively and more colorfully than I am able to dream them.

I even have the feeling now and then that a huge hand (probably that of an Ifrit-Giant) is taking me by the nape of the neck and throwing me out of my own voyage. Well, I am no longer quite at the center and focus of this voyage, that is sure. And my being off the center of it makes the voyage wobble a little bit for me. But does it also wobble for the person who is apparently at the center and focus of the voyage, or does it run straight for him?

For a while I'd had intimations of who this intruder (who made me feel like an intruder in my own adventure) might be; and yet I couldn't quite believe it of him. Well, he is so boyish and simple-minded, and that is the difficulty. But it was not until the Master Spy (all of us smiled when he was called that or called himself that, for a Master Spy he was not), the Master Spy Ali ben Raad the Son of Thunder gave me a great roll of parchment to keep for him ("— in case I am lost, or in case I am pulled back to my own time, I want something of myself and my works to remain in this 'now'. But do not read it, Sindbad. I beg you not to read it. It is too simple-minded entirely. And it would be too awkward for you, of all people, to read it") — oh my gosh, he was the intruder in my adventure! It wasn't until then that I realized that it had to be the unwhiskered, simple-minded, boyish-awkward, apparently self-named Son of Thunder who had pushed me out of the center of own adventure.

How shall I explain the foolishness of this screed that he gave me to keep for him? How many sheep skins were ruined to give the material for it? Of course I read it. When a pathological, logorrheic idiot is on the loose, his sickness must be examined by an expert such as myself. And I would be no true spy if I did not read what somebody begged me not to read. But how shall I explain the simple-mindedness, the goofiness, the outrageousness, the otherworldliness, the impossibility, the *success* of this thrown-together pot-full of wild ideas? For it was successful. He was *here*, and vividly.

I cannot explain it. So I will incorporate it with my own account and let it speak with its own green-wood and multi-jointed tongue. This is it, just as he left it with me. Read it yourself:

I am a simple kid. My name is John Scarlatti Thunderson and I live on the North Side of Chicago on Blackwater Street. My Italian grandmother says that I am lazy. My German grandmother says, "Send him up to the farm in Wisconsin. There must be *something* he can do there. There sure isn't anything he can do here in Chicago." My Irish grandmother says, "Let him alone. He is a good boy. This is the price we all pay for him having all those smart older brothers and sisters. I was afraid the bucket would run empty. Those older ones took more than their share of the brains and didn't leave many for John when he came along. But he's only dumb in comparison. In a dumb family he wouldn't seem especially dumb."

The reason I have three grandmothers is that one of my grandfathers led a double life.

"One thing about John," said my chemistry teacher in high school, "he makes things happen. I bet he could mix the two most inert substances in the laboratory and they'd blow up the place. Nothing would happen if anybody else mixed them, but if John mixed them they'd

blow up the place.”

That set me to thinking. I went to the lab that night. I had a key. I was monitor or clean-up boy that week so I had the key. I mixed the two most inert substances they had in that chemistry laboratory. Sure enough, I blew up the place.

But I was good at art, especially fantasy art. I won first place for fantasy art the last year I was in high school at St. Peters.

“It’s foolish, it’s simple-minded, it’s goofy, it’s screamily-colored, it’s wretchedly drawn, it’s impossible,” the judges decided unanimously, “but it’s the only picture submitted in the Fantasy Art Contest that has any fantasy elements in it at all. We’ve got to give the first place to John. All the other submissions are disqualified because of not having any fantasy elements in them.”

“Maybe we could give it last place, since it’s the only one left,” a judge with minority proclivities suggested. They finally compromised by giving me the special First-And-Last-Place Award (they called it the Alpha and Omega Trophy). But I always shortened it to call it the First Place Award.

But one of the judges wasn’t satisfied to leave bad enough alone.

“I have seen that picture before,” he said, “and it bothers me. A picture that bad would never be reprinted anywhere, and yet I have seen it before, and in a book.” It took him a week, but he found it. It was a picture that had been painted by an ape that belonged to a Caliph back in the Arabian Middle Ages. So that made me the kid who plagiarized a picture from an ape and didn’t do it as well as the ape did it. I probably did plagiarize it, but I didn’t mean to. I was hung up on the Arabian Middle Ages and I put my nose into every book I could find about that period. One thing hadn’t bothered me about the picture I had painted. I was in it. But when I looked at the picture the ape had painted centuries ago, I saw that I was in it too, right in the same place. And it was a better picture of me than I had done. The judge who had dug up the old picture began to shake like everything when he saw that I was in the old picture and that it wasn’t any mistake about it being me. I’m glad nobody else paid any attention to it. But how had I got back there in the Arabian Middle Ages?

Cardinal Newman recalled that when he was a little boy he had wished that the Arabian Nights were true. When I was a little boy, I thought the Arabian Nights *were* true, and I think so yet. I’ve recently come onto new evidence in favor of their factuality.

But I am good at mathematics. The other day, Brother Sebastian said of a special assignment that I had turned in to him: “Do you know what you have just done, John? You have just invented Analytical Geometry. Of course Descartes invented it first, quite a while ago, but he didn’t follow out some of the implications the way you do. To tell you the truth, John, I always thought that Descartes made an exciting field dull. That is one thing that can’t be said against your special assignment. Yours is absolutely open-ended. With your system you can go anywhere you want to go. You can build almost anything you want to build, and you can make it work. You have escaped from the Descartes dead-end, and now the world is your oyster. Whenever you come to an apparent dead-end, you will know that the dull genius has been there before you, and that he stopped there and went no further. But you can open the door which he believed inexorably closed.”

“Couldn’t the world be my ark instead of my oyster?” I asked him. “Oyster shells don’t do a thing for me, but I flip all the way over fresh-water ark shells.”

“You’re an odd one, John,” Brother Sebastian said. “The fresh-water ark has the nothingest shell there is, small and dirty and malodorous. If somebody wanted to hide a great secret, the best way on this world would be to write it small and put it in an ark shell. Nobody would ever pick one of the filthy things up, unless somebody like you.”

Let me tell you something about Brother Sebastian. Six years before this, when he was a senior at this same St. Peters High School, he dropped a pass in the end zone in the big game against Cathedral High. There was nobody near him; the pass was an easy floater; and it would have won the game. When asked about it he said “I’d been working on an open-ended mathematical equation, and while the pass was in the air I had an inkling of how to solve that equation. I knew that I could catch the pass if I concentrated on it. I knew that I could catch the solution to the equation if I concentrated on it. But I couldn’t catch both of them. One of them had to be dropped and lost forever. So I picked the most important of them. I caught the mathematical solution, and I dropped the football.” So this Brother Sebastian, with his straight way of thinking, was the sort of person to understand me best.

“But as to your open-ended system of analytical geometry,” he continued now, “it takes

all the limits off you. You will go far, and probably you will go soon. I'd like to go with you when you go, but my job and my vocation are here. Yes, John, with your new mathematical foundation, you can make almost anything, and you can make it work."

Well, I *did* build an Almost-Anything, and it did work.

But, before that, I had picked up a book 'Colloquial Arabian Self Taught' at a second-hand bookstore on Blackwater Street. I discovered that I already knew colloquial Arabian. It was the secret language that I had been dreaming in for all my life. I asked around some of the other kids. Some of them dreamed in the languages that their parents knew well but they the kids knew only a little bit except in their dreams. But many of the kids didn't have a secret language to dream in at all. They dreamed in English. Oh, how deprived can you get!

And also, before that, I had been one of the discoverers of the Fresh-Water Ark-Shell Show. The most unnoticed things on any lake-shore or beach are the fresh-water ark shells. They are so much smaller than the shells of the salt-water or ocean ark! And they are so dingy! What's the odds against someone picking one up and holding it to his ear? Even if he did so, what's the odds against there being an audio going on just at that moment? But I picked one up once on the shore of Lake Michigan and held it to my ear. And I heard two other kids talking.

"We need a third kid," one of them was saying, "a kid we can trust. With just two kids listening to this we lack a dimension. We got to get a third kid."

They talked a while, and I recognized the voice of one of the kids, though I had heard it only once. It was a kid who lived in the same brownstone-flat building with some cousins of mine in South-Side Chicago eleven miles away from where I live. I thought at the time this was a coincidence; but, later, after I had invented Open-Ended Analytical Geometry, I had understood that 'coincidence' is only the name for a very neat mathematical curve. Anyhow, I became the third kid to listen to the Fresh-Water Ark-Shell Show. It was a real spell-binder. It hadn't any video, but all of us were agreed on how everybody in it looked. They weren't people. They were Ifrits, though Ifrits are usually thought of as giants. But they can be any size they want, and these were very small.

We came to call it all 'The Miniature World of the Decremental Ifrits'. Of course it was all set in the Arabian Middle Ages which is why the show had sought me out. They were tight packed shows. We once timed one at twenty-eight seconds, and it was more jammed full of incident than you can find on any one hour TV show. It was Arabian Nights stuff, yes, but it was from the 'Other Book of the Arabian Nights', which is referred to in the first or known book as a thousand times more magical. You could get anything you wanted to out of the Fresh-Water Ark-Shell Show, and we got some things that scared us silly. Three of the Ark-Shell voices that came to us unbidden we identified as the voices of the Three Magi.

One of the other kids, Joe Speranza, married his girl friend the other day, just before I left. She had moved in next door to him with her family; but that was only cover for a real fact. She was an Ifrit and not a human, and she was beautiful beyond compare.

We ourselves became characters in the Fresh-Water Ark-Shell Show. If you have never been in battles where the blood was bridle-deep on your horse; if you have never swam to the bottom of the ocean with a fish-soul in one ear; if you have never made and ridden on your own flying horse, then be quiet. You haven't lived.

Then, when I was sixteen years old, I built the 'Almost-Anything', and it did work. I went away in it.

Since I could go anywhere I wished, I went to Baghdad in Arabian Middle Ages. The 'Arabian Middle Ages' is my own term, but I know in the marrow of my bones what it means. It was the time when Harun al-Rashid was Caliph of Baghdad, and when the Ifrits in their full power were everywhere.

I had always had the idea that I might have Ifrit blood in me. I believed I had a hint of their special powers and had only to find out how to develop them. My hearing may have been acute enough to overhear conversations in the heavens, as the Ifrits are able to do, if only I could learn to focus in on those conversations properly. I overheard many conversations that I could not identify; and it was always fun to know what the kids at the most distant tables were saying (even when they whispered) in our high school hangouts.

I didn't have the full change-size powers of the Master Ifrits (they could make themselves as big as a mountain or as small as a mouse), but I could, by taking thought, add at least part of cubit to my stature. I could appear to be either the tallest or the shortest boy in my class,

and I was really about medium. And people said I looked very boyish for a sixteen-year-old. Well, if you're going to live for a thousand years or more (as the Ifrits do) you will naturally remain boyish longer than shorter-lived people so. And there's another similarity between me and the Ifrits: I am simple-minded too. If I was ever going to learn about the Ifrits, this was the place to do it.

I landed in the Moslem Year 191 which was the Christian Year 813. It would be known as the 'Year of the Three Caliphs' ("— for reasons unknown," as Ketti wrote in his Arabian History, "since there were only two Caliphs in that year."). I had worked out a plot and a role for myself (really it was a plot I had heard several years before this on the Fresh-Water Ark-Shell Show). According to this plot, all the important Spies in the Universe would be in Baghdad of Earth for a crisis not yet specified. (I'd think of a good crisis; I'd think of a lot of good twists.) And I would be Master Spy Ali ben Raad the Son of Thunder. 'Son of Thunder' really was my name in a way, though I'm told that the original family name was 'Dungersohn' or 'Son of a Dunghill', rather than 'Thundersohn' or 'Son of Thunder'.

When I came down I noticed several space craft drifting in the low sky and pretending to be invisible. But my Almost-Anything Machine had an Anti-Invisibility Viewer on it, so I could see what all the ships looked like. My ship was as good as any of them, and it made up in smallness what it lacked in size. I made it really invisible. And I instructed it in the whistle code that I would give when I wished it to reappear.

And then I was in Great Baghdad, and I met almost immediately many of the high persons I had most wanted to meet. I met the Boy-Caliph (he had been a boy for very many years) Harun al-Rashid, and we got along well from the first instant. Some persons mistook me for Harun (he was always masquerading as a thief or spy or clown or some such), and we did look very much alike.

Harun was like quicksilver, now here, now there. His voice was almost too boyish ('with an Ifrit treble'). And the wave of happiness that overcame anyone who intersected his aura was probably artificial or alchemical. I could understand the rumor that he had the gift of personal invisibility. Later that day I would have evidence that the rumor was true.

I met Sindbad the Sailor. He was in disguise as Master-Spy and Master-Mariner Essindibad Copperbottom from Kentauron Mikron World. I had a great desire to live all Sindbad's voyages and adventures even if it meant ousting him from his own life. I met Alexander of Astrobe; Madame Jingo; Irene of Cos who was a great beauty and who smiled at me with her flirty eyes; Qabda the Fist; the Golden Tom-Cat; people like that. Some of them had been on the Fresh-Water Ark-Shell Show.

But more than any of these I had looked forward to meeting a nameless and undefined someone I had yearned for from my earliest years. This was the 'Mysterious Slave Girl of Beauty Unequalled'. And I saw her suddenly as I went by a Slave Market. The Slave Market was amid the 'Three Hundred Fountains of Baghdad' (and it was amid three hundred other slave markets). The sight of the special Slave Girl hit me like hot thunder; but something else caught the corner of my eye at the same time. It was a fresh-water ark-shell lying on the edge of one of the three hundred fountains. I had carelessly come away without any ark shell, and it was very fortunate that I found this one. I put it in my pocket, and immediately I felt more competent to take care of any situation that might arise.

The auctioneer had just sold a mixed bunch of slave girls, and now he called to the magnificent one: "*You* come up alone. You should bring a good price."

"That is just what I think, you wonderful man," the magnificent Slave Girl said. The harmony of her voice thrilled the whole City of Baghdad in every brick and stick and stone of it. And I, I couldn't get my eyes full enough of her.

"I believe you are the most beautiful girl in the world," I said to her, and my voice hopped up and down when I said it.

"That is just what I think, you wonderful man," the Slave Girl said. I had never heard such a gifted conversationalist in my life.

The bidding went fast and reckless for her, but... Oh, oh, oh! I had come away with no money at all. I had yearned for her unknowingly all my life, and should I lose her now for the lack of a few gold pieces? Well, the bidding had quickly gone up to three thousand gold pieces for the girl.

"Oh, Oh, Oh!" I wailed. "I will have to get an enormous sum of money right now or lose you forever."

"That is just what I think, you wonderful man," the girl said. Oh, her beauty! Her smile!

Her sparkling conversation!

"This is Azraq-Qamar, the Blue Moon," the auctioneer was spiling. "She is the most beautiful girl offered for sale in Baghdad today. She is also the most talented. She is also the most good-natured. She is an excellent cook, and her specialty is camel-hump stuffed with roasted coneys. She is an excellent steed capable of carrying the heaviest man on her shoulders for three land-leagues in one hour's time; and (like the camel) she can go seven days without water. She can read and write, and also play the zither. She is also the most fun of any girl offered for sale in Baghdad today. Isn't all that true of you, Blue Moon?"

"That is just what I think, you wonderful man," Blue Moon said.

"What will I do?" I asked the ark-shell as I took it from my pocket. "If I don't come up with more than three thousand gold pieces, I'll lose her forever. And I don't have even one gold piece."

"Reach in your pocket again," the ark-shell said. "I noticed something else in there with me."

I reached in my pocket again, and I brought out a certified check from the First Royal Bank of Baghdad for four thousand pieces of gold.

"Four thousand pieces of gold!" I bid boldly, and nobody else raised my bid. The girl Azraq-Qamar or Blue Moon belonged to me. Baghdad was the town where one might buy such a transcendent dream, such an archetypal delight, for money. I was sixteen years old this day. And yet it was the first day in my life, in my real life. However could I have lived sixteen years, or even sixteen minutes, without the wonderful Azraq-Qamar, the Fabulous Blue Moon?

"I believe we should find somebody to marry us at once," I said.

"That is just what I think, you wonderful man," she said with her voice that was like golden bells. There was a press of people all going one way in the street. We were caught up in the relentless flow of the people. "Where is everybody going?" I asked a handsome and ample lady of the people.

"We are going to the wedding of the great Ali ben Raad the Son of Thunder and Master Spy; his wedding to the Slave Girl Azraq-Qamar or the Blue Moon whose Christian name is Cinderella. Oh, you two are the bridal couple. Make way everybody for the wonderful groom and bride!"

It was a big wedding in a big church. It wasn't a Moslem place, though the Caliph Harun al-Rashid was there. It was Christian of one of those Eastern Rites such as they have at Saint Malachy's in Chicago. A singer sang "Paper Dolly" in Arabic, and flute players played it on flutes. We were married in a blaze of happiness and ceremony, and then we went to our palace ('One of the nine hundred smaller palaces on Palace Street, but very nice,' as the rental man described it). And we enjoyed perfect bliss. For about thirty seconds we enjoyed perfect bliss. And then it seemed as though Azraq-Qamar was not quite well.

"You look a little run down, my dear," I said to her with concern.

"That is just what I think, you wonderful man," she told me.

"Perhaps you need a doctor," I said.

"That is just what I think, you wonder — awk!" and my beloved wife Azraq-Qamar was dead.

And immediately there was a banging on the door.

I opened the door in sorrow and irritation. Why should strangers intrude on my moment of grief. And a gang of rough men pushed their way into the room.

"We have come to take the dead woman and bury her immediately," the largest of the banging men, of the pushing-in men, said, "for such is the custom of this City. Dead persons must be buried immediately. They generate an unhealthiness in the living when they are left unburied."

Oh, rue and woe! They took away Azraq-Qamar, the Blue Moon, the Pearl Beyond Price, they took her away to bury her. They left me in my misery. For about ten seconds they left me. Then there was another banging on my door. And, numb with unhappiness, I opened it again.

"We have come to take the husband of the dead woman and to bury him alive with her immediately," said the largest of the second bunch of intruding men who pushed in now, "for such is the custom of this City. A man is not much good when he has been separated from his wife by death. So then let him be united with his wife again by death. There is wisdom in all

these old laws."

Bereavement, horror, desolation, and the sharp taste of terror in my mouth! They took me away from my little palace and they brought me to a mountain on the outskirts of town. They opened up the mountain, and they put me down in it beside my dead wife, for that was the place they had buried her in. And then they closed the mountain again.

"Do just what comes naturally to you," one of the buriers shouted down to me. "Die! That's what will come naturally to you. Die, and all your worries will vanish. And you will be at everlasting peace with the one you love."

But my worries did not vanish. They grew horribly. My sorrow and fear overwhelmed me. Oh the bleak hours that I spent there waiting for death in the darkness! (But I was later told that the interval was less than three minutes.)

Then a strange wave of happiness enveloped me. There was gladness, joy, delight! But they were somehow contrived. "Ah, so this what death is like," I said to myself. "Not too bad, I suppose, and yet I expected something deeper. Who do I know who spreads such shallow joys about himself? I'm coming, Azraq-Qamar, my love! I will be with you in an instant, and then forevermore."

Well, this was joyous death, wasn't it? What was wrong with it? What was misplaced? And whence was that almost too boyish giggling, a giggle in the 'Ifrit Treble'? And who did I know whose aura brought such a joy-delight-gladness as to be almost mistaken for death itself by the shallow?

Then the cavern in the mountain, previously as black as bitumen before its first refining, was suddenly ablaze with light. And in the middle of that blaze was the Boy-Caliph Harun al-Rashid and a group of his more boyish and more intimate friends and hangers-on.

I covered my disappointment. Really, I'd rather have died than have lived again in the middle of this shrill laughter, such were my emotions. But I got hold of myself and spoke pleasantly:

"It is with overwhelming delight that I see you again," I told the laughing Caliph. "It is with bottomless joy that I find myself once more in your presence. And yet there is a worm in the middle of this apple of delight. My beloved bride is still dead and cold; and not even a Caliph, but only God himself, could bring her back to life."

The Great-Boy Caliph giggled: "In such small things as that, your Caliph is God. Turn her over, Ali ben Raad the Son of Thunder."

So I turned my wife over onto her wonderful belly.

"Now, see the small winder up between her shoulder-blades," the Caliph laughed. "Wind her up again, Ali, and she will be as good as ever. You were right, though, when you told her that she seemed a little bit run down."

"How could you have known what I told her when we were alone?" I asked the Jokester Caliph as I began to wind my wife up again.

"Oh. I was there. I was there all the time that you two were together. I always make myself invisible and watch my friends when they are newly married. In anybody except a Caliph, who has certain rights, there would be something a little bit sneaky about this. But I love to watch people. It is one of the great enjoyments of my life."

My wife began to stir back to life.

"You are looking better, Dear Blue Moon," I said.

"That is just what I think, you wonderful man," my wife spoke softly, and I realized again what an extraordinary person she was. I caressed her. Several of the hangers-on of the Caliph took out flutes and began to play and sing, so I thought, "Paper Dolly." It had become our song. But then I realized that they were not singing 'Paper' ('Waraq') 'Dolly', but 'Alloy of mercury, copper, iron, chasab, safih, and gold' ('Warraq') 'Dolly'. I translated their correct version in my mind as "Amalgamated Metal Dolly." I love that song yet.

"I'm enchanted with myself when I pull funny tricks like this one," the Boy-Caliph chortled. "Oh, that was rolling-in-the-aisles funny when they told you that you had to be buried alive with your dead wife because that is the custom of the City!" Harun choked over his own laughter. "It is the custom of the City, of course, for foreign persons who are in Baghdad. You have no idea how foreign men in Baghdad carry on when their wives die and they find themselves buried alive with them. I have revels of fun just watching them."

"Well, my friend, shall I have them take your 'wife' back to the novelty dealers' warehouse? She's a popular party item. She's about as cute as a mechanical effigy can be. And one spoken line, if it's a good line, is enough for any female person to speak. We'll just have

them cart her off... unless, that is, you want to keep her for some reason."

"Of course I want to keep her!" I almost ranted. "She is my wife! She is the light of my life, she is the blood of my liver, she is the sap of my tree! She's perfect."

"That is just what I think, you wonderful man," my wife spoke with that eerie charm that almost drove me out of my mind.

"Everyone to his own taste," the Boy-Caliph said. "Some of the fellows like inflatable silk-fabric dolls life-sized and in living color. If you really mean to keep her, we can have her programmed to speak several other sentences."

"No, no, no, not programmed. Any addition to her or subtraction from her might spoil her perfection. And any change would have to be natural and not programmed."

"Oh, you could have her to be inhabited by a spirit of some sort or other, Ali, but it's usually pretty trashy spirits you get when you open the door and let them move into a mechanism. Dine with me at midnight, Son of Thunder. I've got a couple of other practical jokes going on right now, and I must rush here and there to be at the climax of each of them."

I realized then, somewhat tardily, that I had just lived through the 'Fourth Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor'; but I had lived through a version of it that was much better than the original. In its accepted version it had been the only one of the 'Voyages' to have an unhappy ending: the Wife of Sindbad died irrevocably and could not be brought back to life. But my version was wonderful, though slightly spoiled by the intrusion of the Boy-Caliph, and the original was not at all wonderful.

"I shouldn't doubt that I myself am the original Sindbad and that the accepted version is that of an interloper Sindbad," I said when I thought about it. "But is there any way on God's Green Earth to say who is the true Sindbad and who is the false?"

We were out from the mountain that had also been our grave. We were away from that dismal site, and were once more walking in the dazzling streets of Baghdad Mirage. My wife pulled me to a stop in front of a Goat-Skin-Goods shop. We went in, and she brought a piece of parchment and a stylus. Then she began to write, swiftly and beautifully, on the parchment:

"I am programmed to say only one silly sentence, Great-Heart, and sometimes one silly variation of it. But what those rubes who assembled me don't know is that I taught myself to write and I can write any damned thing I please. Yes, I am a spirit who came to live in this mechanical body (having no other home); but I am not one of those trashy spirits that the Caliph referred to. He travels with the wrong kind of spirits.

"Yes, lovely John Thunderson, there is a way to tell the real Sindbad from the false Sindbad. It is found in a book of Arabian proverbs: 'The True Sindbad-the-Sailor has Sea-Weed growing on him at the shouka (the fork or bifurcation) region of the body. The False Sindbad does not have this green growth.' I tell you, my darling, that if you don't have it I can implant it. Back at the novelty dealers' warehouse, I used to transplant silken gazelle hair into some of the other manikins because I have such rapid and deft fingers for that sort of work, and manikins always love it when you make them look nicer. And if you can find an electronic voice-box here in early ninth-century Baghdad (it won't be easily found, and yet there are several electronics shops in the suburbs), I can probably install it in myself, and then I will be able to speak anything I wish. Oh, I'll scout around, Thou-Honey-From-Arcadian-Bees, and see whether the other Sindbad (Master-Spy and Master-Mariner Essindibad Copperbottom of Kentauron Mikron World) has Sea-Weed growing at his bifurcation or not. If he does have it, I'll eradicate it. Whatever you want to be, you *will* be, if I can bring it about."

'A Wife who is true is like a Brook in a Meadow', as another Arabian proverb has it.

Then I decided to create a new past for myself. With the aid of my quick-witted wife and my open-ended analytics, it was easily done. Now I am from the world Kentauron Mikron and my alternate name is 'Master Politicus Rory Quicksilver'. My influential friends on Kentauron Mikron are: Master-Caliph Redcrown Charnel, Master-Magus Moses Epistemon, Grand-Dame Of-the-Seven-Musics Goodlife Tumblehome, Grand-Damsel-of-the-Commonwealth Drusilla Happyghost, Master-Metropolitan Peter Sheldrake, Master-Mariner Essindibad Copperbottom. Easy, easy there, John Thunderson boy, this latter person believes that he is sometimes myself or that I am only an aspect of himself. He must be disabused of all such ideas. For this Essindibad claims to be no less than the original Sindbad the Sailor; but I doubt whether he was ever on Kentauron Mikron.

Now he is trying to claim this circle of my friends as *his* circle of friends. He is trying to claim my first wife, Grand-Dame Of-the-Seven-Musics Tumblehome as *his* first wife. Well, that part does not disturb me. My own present wife, Azraq-Qamar the Blue Moon, is ten times the woman that the Grand-Dame is. Essindibad Copperbottom does not seem to remember me from Kentauron Mikron and neither does the Grand-Dame; but I am sure they *will* remember me again just as soon as I do something memorable. I'm working on that.

Azraq-Qamar my Blue Moon has just gone off with this Essindibad after whispering something in his ear. How strange that is! What can she be thinking of? Soon Essindibad will be saying that Azraq-Qamar also is his wife.

Meanwhile, the Boy-Caliph Harun al-Rashid is my best friend. He is making me vizier of many entire realms. "As long as I am Caliph, you will be vizier of many lands," he says. Has he forgotten that he is turning the Caliphate over to his son Al-Amin this very day? I may be a never, not-now-nor future either vizier.

And there is real trouble brewing. The two sons of Harun al-Rashid, both of whom because of a mathematical carelessness or anomaly are older than their father, are riding here to take control of the Caliphate. There is terrible trouble a-borning, and frightful death for many. But 'Terrible Trouble' is only the reverse side of the coin whose obverse is named 'Glorious Adventure'.

My wife Azraq-Qamar the Blue Moon returned with Master-Spy and Master-Mariner Essindibad Copperbottom of Kentauron. She winked at me, and gave me a sort of victory sign. She looks fresh as a daisy (a frequent term in Arabic proverbial), but he looks tired and befuddled.

"You'd never believe it, John Thunderson my love," she wrote on a little piece of parchment, "but Essindibad Copperbottom *did have* Sea-Weed growing on him. He *was* the real Sindbad the Sailor. I write that he *did have* and that he *was*, for he *does not have* now, and he *is not* now. I plucked him clean and left him in a state of infatuation and silliness. And now I will implant the Sea-Weed into yourself and make you to be the Genuine person. Take down your pants, John Thunderson, the Real-Sindbad-The-Sailor-To-Be-Immediately!"

"Here? In front of all these people?!" I asked. Sometimes she was almost too direct.

"Do you not know when you are covered by the cloak of invisibility?" she asked in her rapid handwriting. "You are so covered now, and so am I. Oh, of course it will hurt a little bit, but it will *validate* you. Oh, are not my fingers quick and deft! Did you ever see anything like them? There, it's done!"

In less than three minutes, I was the real and only Sindbad the Sailor, and the proof of it was growing on me. Blessed be all Arabian proverbs!

Now Azraq-Qamar, the Blue Moon, the new wife of my bosom, wants me to take her to Chicago to meet my mother. Or else she wants me to take her to Kentauron Mikron World to meet my alternate mother.

Enough of that! Oh, ten times enough of that!

This is myself again, the Master-Spy and Master-Mariner Essindibad Copperbottom also known as Sindbad the Sailor. Was that not a curious bunch of scribble that the boy Ali ben Raad the Son of Thunder wrote? He gave the writing to me to keep for him. I was the only one, he said, of sufficient honor to be trusted, the only one who would not read the scribble that was given me for safe-keeping. Did I become a Master-Spy by neglecting to read whatever is given to me in confidence?

And it is this unbearded whelp who has cut himself into my voyages and adventures and dreams, and into my very person. But my good wife, the Grande-Dame Tumblehome, finds him delightful. I wonder why?

This is by no means *all* of the silly screed of that self-named Son of Thunder. But a person can only tolerate so much of it at one time. I'll introduce further bits of it as I go along, for his silliness is somehow a key to the most puzzling of my voyages and the voyage would be incomplete if this silly key were left out.

And now it is no longer the same with me as it was before. I have been stripped of what was part of my manhood. I no longer have the sharp odor of the briny deep in my nostrils when I sit and when I stand. I no longer have that music of musics, the flopping of canvas in the wind, banging in my ears. And I no longer have Sea-Weed growing on me, so how can I prove that I am still the real Sindbad the Sailor? I am reminded of an old Arabian poem:

If this be me, as I think it be,
I have a dog at home. He will know me.
If this be not me
He will howl and wail:
But if it be me
He will wag his tail.

Well, enough of the fun. It is time to get back to the serious business of spying.

One Bright Day In The Sun

With future lightning at his beck,
With puzzlement and wonder,
He strides the deck with sunburned neck.
His name is 'Son of Thunder'.

—Baghdad Music Hall Song, Anno 813.

In this Arabian Ocean of the mind there is flotsam of all the great shipwrecks of the past, but there is also the flotsam of the wrecks-yet-to-be.

—*The Back Door of History*. Arpad Arutinov.

All Paradise opens. Let me die eating ortolans to the sound of soft music.

—*The Young Duke*. Benjamin Disraeli.

If a man has only one slave, let him free him today. If he has two slaves, let him free one slave today and the other tomorrow. If he has more than two slaves, let him free one slave every day until all are freed. If he has more than one hundred slaves, then all of those who remain enslaved to him must be freed on the hundredth day. We desire to put an end to slavery, but we also desire that ancient custom should not have a sudden or disorienting end.

—Laws of the Caliph Al-Amin.

If there should stand only one Bright Day in the Sun of God and it be followed by no other bright day, let it still be blessed and memorialized forever.

—*The Short Reign of the Caliph Al-Amin*. Moisha El-Gazma.

This is Essindibad Copperbottom again, writing in his own hand in his own journal.

I can recall no government, ever, anywhere, more enlightened, more progressive, more pious, more tolerant, more supportive of the arts and religion, more joyful, more a reason of pride, more fostering, more caring, more scientific, more prospering, more wise, more bountiful, more innovative, more overflowing with the joy-of-life, more mantic, more gracious, more elegant, more full of the urbane amusement-of-life, more promising of the good things yet to come, more visionary, more vital, more full of the rich sap of life, more colorful, more lively with all the lively arts, more wonderful in all ways and endeavors, *more everything* than was the admirable government of the Caliph Al-Amin the Bright Star of the Abbasid Dynasty.

In the time of Al-Amin, in the Great Day of his reign as Caliph, projects were set up for the dredging of canals and the draining of swamps, for the repair and expansion of the irrigation system in all the Two-River Region, for the 'Dromedary Express' for the rapid carrying of mail and small packages from one end of the caliphate to another, for the 'Reanimated Department of Rivers and Harbors' to foster easy travel from Holy Baghdad the whole two hundred miles to the Arabian Gulf and onto the Ocean itself, for the 'Reanimated Department of Fisheries' to foster finer table fish from both River and Ocean and to restrict the depredations of the alligators that had been eating up the choicest fish, for the 'Reanimated Department of Armaments' to proceed with the casting of the big brass cannon to batter down the walls of Constantinople, for the 'Reanimated Department of Selected Plunder' to bring slips of Mandarin-Orange trees from China, and also to bring silk worms and silk-worm-berry trees from that land despite the Chinese ban on the export of those things, for the 'Reanimated Department of Writing Books' to devise something handier than parchment or clay to write on and something easier to obtain than the ink of the giant sea-squid to write

withers, for the 'Reanimated Department of Sewers and Disposal Pools' to unclog the festering sewers of Baghdad and the open cesspools so that the air might be sweet again. The Caliph also recognized the Flute-Players' Guild and the Fiddlers' Guild and announced his support both of better music and of living wages for the musicians. A commission was set up to dispose of the grounded whale above Bassorah that for more than a month had offended the air all the way to Baghdad when the wind was from the south-east. The Caliph also expounded an enabling act to create the 'Royal Baghdad Performing Arts Theatre, Opera, and Ballet', and he appointed directors for the project. This and much else he did in the time allotted to him.

I can think of no more remarkable governmental achievements anywhere, in any land or world, in a shorter time, than the achievements of this 'Whirlwind Government of the Caliph Al-Amin'. It is to be regretted that this elegant and efficacious government lasted just short of twenty-four hours.

Oh yes, here's another bit of the screed of that false and callow Sindbad Ali ben Raad the self-called Son of Thunder. Reading his nonsense is like eating salted miksarat. You know that it's silly junk food, but it's hard to leave off eating it.

My beautiful wife, the enchanting Azraq-Qamar the Blue-Moon, *did* find an electronic voice-box right here in early ninth century Baghdad. I didn't recognize the manufacture but it was German and from a later century than the ninth. Blue Moon was very pleased with it.

"And if you don't like the way I sound with my new voice," she said, "this voice-box dealer will tune it for us to be either sweeter or sultrier or more mysterious or sexier, or simply more pleasant. I want you to like my new voice, you wonderful man."

"I love it," I said. "But if there really is a man selling electronic equipment here in early ninth century Baghdad, I'd like to know what his name is and where I can find him."

"His name is Cut-Rate Electronics Sam," my delicious wife said, "and he is only two squares from here and in a sort of alley. Come and see."

I went with Blue Moon, and we came to a sort of shop three steps down from a little alley. Cut-Rate Electronics Sam looked very much like somebody I used to know a long time ago, like two days ago.

"Didn't you used to have an electronic and gadget shop on Blackwater Street in Chicago?" I asked him. "Didn't I buy some of the relays and sensors for my Almost-Anything Time-and-Space Cruiser from you?"

"No. That must have been my brother Bottom-Dollar Electronics Ham, 'The Ham's Ham'. Ham has the most 'grab-you' motto I ever heard: 'I will not be undersold'. I wish I could think of clever things like that."

"And how did you get to Baghdad in the early ninth century, Sam?"

"The same way you did, apparently. It's very trendy to come here and now. It's the place-and-time of the week. We call it the Baghdad Express. There must be a half a dozen of us who have caught the Baghdad Fever and come to this Here and Now. I had a lot of surplus electronic junk, and I had a lot of talent. And I thought if I put them together I'd have a vehicle that would take me anywhere. I had traveled a lot before, and I've always been challenged by the 'Hard Sell', selling refrigerators to the Eskimos (I've done that; be careful of it; they don't keep up their payments very well), and even harder traffics. I decided that I'd set up an electronic shop somewhere in a pre-electronic age. So I set it up in this place and time."

"Are you making any money?"

"Yes. But how did you know? How word does get around! I'm minting money, though one of my dies is cracked and must be replaced. I can make bronze that looks enough like gold to fool the people here. Well, many great men turned to counterfeiting in their youths to get by. And I am creating a market (slowly, it's true) for my electrical and electronic items."

"And you say there are other persons from my time around here, Sam? I'd like to meet some of them."

"There's a half a dozen or so that I know. One of them that you might like to meet is Scheherazade. She lives in the garret of this very building. Go right up the back stairs. She loves company."

"You don't mean Scheherazade the Story-Teller? But she isn't from our century."

"Yes she is. Go up and talk to her and she'll explain everything."

"Do you think we could set up an electronic age here, Sam? Set up a real electronic age and get rich from it?"

"To be in Baghdad is to be rich already. And there's no need for a canned, electronic life when there's a real life to be had. Why should we can music when good live musicians and singers are to be had for almost nothing everywhere? Why should we can personal dramas when the very streets are loaded with personal dramas, comic, weird, goulouche, anything you want? Why print fiction or fact when there are professional story-tellers plying their craft on every corner, and when there are heralds howling out the news on the quarter-hour? Why should we can dancing when the gamins dance and run all the time, and the very stones dance to the flute music? Why should we can 'talk shows' when wherever one or more persons are gathered together in Baghdad there is a talk show superior to the canned 'name persons' variety? Why should we broadcast weather reports when the weather is always perfect? No, Thunderson, electronics here may sometimes serve for making better mousetraps and the analogs of them, but for little more. I can, for instance, make an electronic invisibility cloak that will be better than the locally-made traditional invisibility cloaks. In a city where every citizen has from three to thirty invisibility cloaks, there is always room for a better one. I can make good electronic voices like the one I made for your wife Blue Moon here. And in a place like this where the people like to be able to change their voices as often as they change their robes, there is business to be had in 'voices'. I make good 'aura modification kits', and here every person from the Caliph on down likes to have a selection of magic auras to use. And I am pushing a line of 'electronic practical-joke kits'. And then there are all the 'charms', to make one person hate another, for instance. Or to make a person look like a donkey without him knowing that there is any change in his appearance. And electronic charms are simply more efficacious than are nonelectronic charms. Well, it's a living, and living in Magic Baghdad is worth everything. I don't know what effect the change in Caliphs will make."

"How long have you been here, Sam?"

"Oh, this is my third day. That makes me something of an old-timer. Though it doesn't put me in the class with Scheherazade."

Sam had been working on my wife's voice box all this while. And after he had added various permutations and enchantments to her voice and she was more than satisfied with them, Blue Moon and myself left that interesting person and went up the back stairways to the garret of the narrow building to find Scheherazade.

The garret was really the roof itself, a sodded and grassed area grazed by seven goats. There was a canopy, but all the flaps of it had been rolled back to let in the glorious daylight. And Scheherazade, a dark and smiling and chubby young lady, was eating Syrian pastry with her left hand and writing on a parchment roll with her right. She rose and kissed both of us resoundingly and smiled with a quiet smile.

"We are enchanted to meet you, Scheherazade," said my wife Blue Moon in her new beautifully tuned voice that made one shiver with pleasure. "We are both fans of yours. And when we come face to face with you all we can ask is 'How come?' Electronic Sam, three steps down from the alley, says that you are from a future century and a futuristic place, as is my husband here. How did it all happen?"

"Oh, hi, Blue Moon," Scheherazade said. "You look so jazzy that I didn't recognize you at first, and I didn't know that you could talk real talk now. I knew you when you were only a mechanical effigy and could speak only one sentence and one variation of it. Still and all, sentences like 'That is just what I think, you wonderful man' and 'That is just what I think, you wonderful woman' are about all that a girl needs. I have heard it said of you that you were a dazzling conversationalist, that on the evidence of just those two scraps. I rented you for party gags twice, but I don't believe you have much memory of the times when you were still an effigy."

"How did it all happen to me?" you ask. "How did I come to be Scheherazade?" Oh, I read an advertisement in a magazine and I was totally hooked by it. The ad read: 'Here is the job that has been waiting almost twelve centuries for the right person to fill it. *You may be that right person.* Travel to exotic spots in both time and space. Write mainly for one person only, the highest ruler in the world, one who is the master of a dozen kingdoms. Write True Literature in the Perfect Conditions for it. Write masterpieces that will be acclaimed as such for a thousand years. Live in the most enchanting city that has ever been on earth. In this job you will wear diamonds and pearls, and your name will be known to all educated persons everywhere.' So I answered the ad in *Writer's World*, and I got the job."

"It didn't bother me too much when they blindfolded me and pushed me down on the back seat of the car and sat on me to keep me hidden while we rode to my embarkation point. Nor was I very much shook when they told me 'We won't guarantee to get you back here when the job is finished, if it is ever finished. All we will guarantee is that if you are marooned, you will be marooned in an interesting place.' 'That's good enough for me,' I said. 'If I will write masterpieces that will be remembered for a thousand years, the details don't matter.' And after a short (I thought) and bumpy ride from my embarkation point to my destination, I was doubly delighted when they removed my blindfold and I immediately saw that I was in Magic Baghdad of the Ninth Century.

"When they branded me as 'slave' with a white-hot iron, I said 'Oh, how delightful! I bet none of the girls at home have ever been branded 'slave'. I bet none of them have ever been hung up by the wrists and given fifty lashes with the knout.' They didn't hang me up by the thumbs because writing was to be my job and I needed my thumbs unbroken to hold either a stylus or a quill. There is the knout there hanging on my wall. I bought it with my first pay check for a souvenir. Isn't it a beauty! They still come in every evening and string me up and give me fifty lashes, and it is the high point of my day. I was delighted with my job, and I still remain delighted with it after more than two and a half years."

Scheherazade did wear diamonds and pearls on this job, a diamond in each ear, and a pearl in her navel. She wore little else, but in the eternal summertime that is Baghdad she needed little else.

"I am in Baghdad," Scheherazade spoke in her throaty, dreamy chuckle. "I am drenched in Magic Baghdad. I can look down into its streets and alleys from all four sides of my 'garret' here. I am drenched in its uncommon common people and in their rich color of everything. There are at least four colors in Baghdad that are found nowhere else in the world. They send me up bowls of barley soup and trays of Syrian pastry. They want to fatten me up to the style here, but I remain chubby only and not really fat. That is a thing that bugs out my employer, the Boy-Caliph Harun al-Rashid. I'm married to him, of course, but so are one thousand other girls. He thinks that I would be perfect, perfect, if only I were fatter, fatter.

"And I really do write immortal masterpieces here; that's the main thing. I've written nearly a thousand of them. I'm the ideal chronicler of the Baghdad Scene."

"Why the goats?" I asked her.

"Oh, for parchment and vellum to write on. And for milk from the old mother goat. The beasts are great friends of mine, and I model many of my characters on them. 'People of Baghdad' and 'goats of anywhere at all' have minds that are very much alike. I'd rather I didn't have to kill them to get the skins, but so far science hasn't found a better way.

"I get my ink from a squid in the fountain below. He is a cranky old male, and he stings me viciously once a week when I milk him for the ink. I model some of my characters on him too. Did I tell you that Baghdad People and squids have minds that are very much alike? My masterpieces are always in that most limited of editions, a single manuscript copy only; and it is always given to the Boy-Caliph, the Caliph of all the world. He has it read out loud, though, and the story-tellers memorize it and tell it all over the Caliphate. This is a refining process. My masterpieces aren't nearly as good when they leave my hand as they become after they've rolled off the tongues of a hundred storytellers; and my reputation wouldn't be as high if it were based on my own words rather than on my words as refined by the storytellers. I wrote, for instance, a series of adventures: 'The Voyages of Slattery the Sailor'. I named my lead character after a Joe Slattery who used to ship out of Galveston the year I lived there. Wow! Could he ever tell those salt-water lives and lies! But the story-tellers changed the name to 'The Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor'. Somehow their adapted name goes better."

"I am Sindbad," I said with a touch of pride.

"I don't think so," Scheherazade murmured doubtfully in her pleasantly fuzzy voice. (All Baghdad voices have this touch of fuzziness in them.) "The real Sindbad has Sea-Weed growing on him in the private regions of his body. Hold him, Blue Moon, and I'll just have a look! Well, I look and I look, but what do I see? Well, it is, and it isn't. The Sea-Weed is genuine, but I believe that it's an implant job. And I believe that you did it, Blue Moon. Oh, this isn't Sindbad. This is some sort of forgery."

"If my husband isn't Sindbad, then there isn't any Sindbad," my delightful wife Blue Moon maintained. "These are the same Sea-Weeds that grew on the Original Sindbad. I extirpated them from him and fixed him so he could never grow Sea-Weed again. I doubt if he realizes the extent of his disaster yet. And then I implanted the genuine Sea-Weed into my

husband John Thunderson. As a result of that, he has become the real and genuine Sindbad, for the Sea-Weed is growing on him in very healthy fashion. If my husband the Master-Spy John Thunderson isn't Sindbad, then there isn't any Sindbad anywhere."

"The death of a character!" Scheherazade cried with a sad smile and a pang in her voice. "Only a masterpiecer knows that her characters are real and that they die real deaths. Oh, did you hear the latest edict of our latest Caliph Al-Amin? He has ordered that slaves be flogged no more, and that former slaves be flogged no more either. After today there will be neither slaves nor former slaves, you know. The whole idea of slavery will be forbid and must be forgotten. I'm not sure that the people will accept this. I'll miss it myself. I may have to hire some person to flog me, and the flogger will probably charge a high price for it since it'll be forbidden and illegal."

"I'll miss it too," said my wife Blue Moon, "but I've been missing it for some hours now. My husband, this wonderful man here, doesn't understand about things like that. In this he has been neglecting me."

There is a fountain here, and a pool where the life-bubbles rise to the top and may be caught in nets. But if ever a ruler or Caliph is too prodigal of the life-bubbles, then the fountain may run dry of them and produce them no longer. Then what will the people do? Then how will justice be served?

Legends of the Persian Gulf. Moisha El-Gazma.

"When I came to Baghdad, one of the first things I noticed was that the Earth is very thin here," the Masterpiecer Scheherazade said. "The Earth is very thin, and the demons are very near. They come up out of the ground and out of the rivers almost at will, and they have free run of the place. I already knew about that stuff. I was into devils and demons the year I lived in Los Angeles. Oh, it was the devils who introduced the floggings and the Syrian cookies too. It's all fun, but it wears a little bit thin, even as the Earth does here. The new Caliph Al-Amin is right to ban the slaveries and the floggings. He'll be right if he bans quite a few other things. But I'm not sure that the people will accept his reforms. The magic of Baghdad is black magic, and it is tainted through and through. But, as a sort of magician-ess, I am hooked on it."

"I love it," Blue Moon said. "I don't think it's a taint at all."

"I love it too, and of course it's tainted," Scheherazade said. "The Syrian cookies (they're made of poppy flour, you know) what have they done to me? The stuff is in so many forms. You are hooked on it too, my dear Blue Moon? Now the fact is that there is very little of this stuff on the other worlds. Gaea-Earth here is really the Pandora World, the Pandora Box, the world of the legend that has so many depths. And the truest and deepest of them is the one that goes all the way to the center of the Earth. This world is the Pandora Box, and all the devils from all the other worlds were brought here and imprisoned in the center of this world. I'm not sure whether this was before people were made or afterwards. Do either of you know what load that wagon being pulled by four donkeys in the lane below us is carrying?"

"It looks like iridescent slime, at the same time beautiful and repellent," I said.

"It is a wagon-load of life-bubbles," Scheherazade said. "These strange bubbles rise to the surface of a fountain-pool in the rivers just outside the Walls of Baghdad. There are more than ten thousand of them on that wagon, and they will be used for the changing of the Caliphs. When a person is to be executed, either by hanging or beheading or being torn about by wild horses, the judge, (in his infinite compassion) will sometimes allow one of these life-bubbles to be bestowed on him. Then he will live a total life, ninety years long, a packed and eventful and most pleasant life. He will have progeny and pleasure and fulfillment, and he will have this wonderful life all in ten seconds before he is executed. This is in compensation: a longer and fuller life given to him in place of a (usually) shorter and skinnier life taken away from him. But there are some people who are uneasy about these pleasant and intruded bargains, and they call them 'Devil's Gifts'. These life-bubbles are found nowhere except in the one fountain-pool on this one world, Gaea-Earth. And perhaps they are devilish, for our world has been called 'The Devils' Own World'."

"All the ten billions of devils, winged demons, cloven-foot cloodies, pandemoniums, Ifrits, Morlocks, Ainsprids, Djinnns, from all the seventeen worlds were imprisoned in the center of this world, and their influence oozes out. But in every version of this true legend, the Pandora Box has a weak place where it may be opened. Sometimes it is opened only a crack, and sometimes it is thrown wide open. But the Magic City Baghdad the Holy is that weak place in

the world, that crack where the devils climb out and ravage things again. The ones who sneak out first are gentle-seeming. Lady Narkos is one of them. She is gentle and insinuating. She lives in the Syrian cookies and in other things, in certain pipe smoke and in certain white powder; and we eat her body when we partake of any of her habitations. And the size-changing and shape-changing Ifrits seem to be comic characters; but they come from hell and thither they must return. Say, I could have a ship that sails through a reef into a different sort of ocean; and then it begins to sail under the land, and it goes down and down as though into a vortex, into the center-of-the-world sea full of devils. And I could have a —”

“What is this fuzzy jabber, Scheherazade?” I asked her.

“Oh, it's my Masterpiece of this Day being born into my mind. I will call it the Twelfth Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor.”

“But I am Sindbad,” I reminded her.

“Let us not go into that again,” Scheherazade protested. She had violet-colored eyes. Has anybody else noticed that of her? “I wonder whether the new Caliph Al-Amin will take me for one of his wives,” she asked the world and herself. “If he doesn't, then I'm sort of out of a job.”

This is myself, Master-Spy, Master-Several-Things, Essindibad Copperbottom, the one and only and original Sindbad, back again and in control of his High Journal. That's about all of that kid John Thunderson that I can take at one time. The drivels of this John Thunderson, who also uses the name Ali ben Raad, is a good sample of the thinking and drooling of the lower people. And yet this drivel has reflections of valid situations and facts in it. And Scheherazade bases many of her stories on such facts.

But the Fact of the Day is that the new Caliph Al-Amin is issuing proclamations so rapidly that four different heralds have blown their voices, one after another. Harun al-Rashid never issued so many proclamations in all his years as Al-Amin has done in just part of one day. And he has also been giving philosophical orations:

“Why are you here?” he asks the crowd. “Every one of you is here for a different reason, and not one in a hundred of you knows *why* he is here. Each one of you must figure out his reason for being, and then we will combine your reasons and find the commonwealth's reason for being. The God of the Prophets has not made anyone in vain. You lead vain lives at your own immortal peril. More wheat must be grown in the Two Rivers Region. You say: ‘we have no need to grow wheat: the Kurds bring us wheat in tribute’. But that is an arrangement which I wish to break. Yes, we receive honey from Tabaristan and quinces from Khorasan in tribute. We eat the dromedaries of Kora-Kum and the fat monkeys of Tibbu. We have narcotics from Hadhramaut and wine from Armenia in tribute. We have walnuts from Persia and hazel-nuts from Spain. And we use Spanish slave-soldiers to enforce our will in Barbary. We are like circus jugglers juggling apples (from the Black Sea Coast). But when we drop the first apple we will hear our death-knell ringing in our ear. Besides that, our juggling act is based on cruelty, and we shall none of us enter the Kingdom till we are purged of our cruelty.

“Howl, People of Baghdad! Roar in your wrath! And then you will turn to Lady Narkos for solace and justification. But the power of Lady Narkos is something I intend to break. Think about this, Citizens. Think about it, Freed-Men and Slaves. Every glob of thistledown that blows out of the desert has the name of one of you on it. You will also dry up and blow away unless you avert your minds. I will speak to you of these things and of other matters again in an hour or so. Make ready your minds for it! I myself have nothing to gain from these hard sayings. I myself, from this day forth, already own the world and all that is in it. We are ourselves balanced precariously over the pit of hell. If we stumble now, we will stumble forever. I did not know that things were so bad here. Had I known, I would have come sooner.”

Those were indeed hard sayings for the people of Baghdad. But they broke on the ears as novelties, and the Baghdad people love novelties more than anything else in the world. The things would be pondered, but not accepted, until the new Caliph spoke of them again in an hour or so.

They were also pondered by other-world people such as myself. On our own world of Kentauron Mikron we have planetary memory of great wars and battles, of decisions made and of categories attacked and defended, all before there were any human persons or even quasi-human persons on any of the worlds. I do not know how the pre-human things are remembered (‘The doukh-birds remember them for us,’ one savant says; ‘The alligators of the

swamps remember them,' say other students of the phenomenon; 'The very sands and stones remember them,' say still other persons), but remembered they are. And the *blood* of some of us remembers the events. For there are those on my world, and I am one of them, who feel strongly that we have some of the older-than-human blood in our bodies.

And yet the dubious spirits and devils, except for a few Ifrit remnants, have been swept from all others of the Five Kindred Worlds, from all the others of the Seventeen Worlds for that matter, before the first people ever came from the hand of God. All of these dubious spirits and devils were imprisoned in the interior of one world, Gaea-Earth where I am at present, Gaea-Earth which is often called Hell Planet. Because of the close-packed demonry within, Gaea is the only habitable planet that has a hot core. But it seems to make no difference to it. Such scientists as there are on Gaea attribute all sorts of phenomena to the hot core: volcanoes, geysers, hot springs. But these things are really caused, not by the hot core, but by mountains rising and sinking, and by the rocks and the shields of the world rubbing together.

But the oceanic under-minds of all of us are permeated by the spirits, either grubby or splendid, who walked our worlds before we were born, before the human species was born. The oceanic under-minds of all persons of all worlds have a fearful connection with the igneous underworld or within-world of Gaea-Earth. If the imprisoned creatures, titans, devils, do break out, we are all threatened, no matter on what world we live. The outbreaking demons are shape-changers and size-changers and appearance-changers. And they often assume a good and gladsome look on their first breaking out.

I believe that the charming Lady Narkos is one of the devils who broke out again in recent centuries, that she has an old habit of breaking out. I believe that the Boy-Caliph of the ever-changing surname, he who has now been born successively on almost all of the worlds, is another of them, a very mysterious other of them. All of us great spies were triggered into action by this outbreak-threat renewed in our century. (Perhaps it is renewed in every century.) We were alerted and we came to try to discover this break-out point and the proponents of the breakout. The confining doors of the great within-world prison can only be unlocked and opened from the outside. There are traitors who unlock the doors; and we great spies must find the traitors and the traitor-masters.

About the middle of the afternoon of this his first day as Caliph, Al-Amin decreed that all the treasures of the City should be opened and that each person of Baghdad would be given ten pieces of gold and also three gems: either diamonds, opal, pearl, ruby, emerald, sapphire, chrysoberyl, topaz, zircon, peach-blossom beryl, cats-eye, quartz, amethyst, garnet, aquamarine, jade, turquoise, lapis lazuli, malachite, morganite, scarlet amber, and any other species of jewels that are written in the Royal Book of Jewels (for Al-Amin the New Caliph did not remember near all the kinds of gems that were in the treasures).

Officials were set outside each of the one hundred doors of the main treasury building (twenty officials outside each door) to distribute the bounty, but it was soon seen that this would be too slow. Thereupon all the windows of the great buildings were thrown open, and sacks and barrels were thrown into the streets.

"Persons of Baghdad," the New Caliph Al-Amin spoke from a balcony high on the first of the royal buildings. "Each of you will take ten pieces of gold and three jewels, and then you will withdraw to give others of the multitudes the opportunity to get theirs. I know that none of you will take more than ten pieces of gold and three jewels because you are honorable people of Baghdad. When you have all received your bounty, there will still be great heaps of it left in the streets. I know that none of you will bother any of that heaped-up wealth, again because you are honorable people of Baghdad. The sun will go down on it, and the sun will come up on it again in the morning, and not one excess piece of it will be touched. People with rakes will rake the piles of gold and jewels out evenly so that they may cover many blocks around. Then will the proverb be fulfilled: 'In the Bright Day in the Sun, the Streets of Baghdad Will Be Paved With Gold and Jewels So That the Day May Be Remembered.'

"And now, that we may no longer be separated and divided from the heavens, I am having the mirage-sky (made of paper-thin electrum metal and floated on mist) taken down. My father had put it there. He said that Man had put it there in the Babel days also, an enticement to the workmen ('We are nearly there to the sky; we can almost reach up and touch the sky') to keep building the tower higher and higher. And my father got a sort of exultation from touching this artificial sky with his hands. But now it is burst and gone in one

calculated instant! Gone, gone! See how much brighter the sun shines now!"

"Too bright," some of the people said.

"And now, that there be no longer division between us," Al-Amin spoke in a voice that had already grown tired and rasping, "I decree that every person of Baghdad will henceforth be a royal person and may come and go by the Royal Gate and may walk on the Royal Street. Only the Caliph (by virtue of his office, not of his person), and some of the priests (they themselves will not know who they are; only God who designates them secretly will know who they are) will stand somewhat higher than the other people; but the unaided eye cannot see their greater height.

"I will now make appointments, some openly, some in private. One that I now make openly is that the Great Ali ben Hisan shall be special Commander of Horses and shall immediately ride towards the northeast with ten thousand horsemen and shall intercept all roads in that sector and seize a lone horseman (he was a lone horseman, but now the sound of horse-hooves in my head indicate that he may have picked up a few hundred followers), which horseman you will know because of his great size and the great anger in which he comes. And, besides, you have known him for many years. When you have seized this horseman, Ali ben Hisan, you will reason with him gently if he can be reasoned with. And if he cannot be reasoned with, then you will kill him gently. You will kill him very gently, for he is my brother.

"Another appointment I now make openly is that Great Sindbad the Sailor shall take ship and find passage under the earth and prevent traitors from opening the iron doors of hell under the Earth. This Sindbad, this one-and-only Sindbad, can be known (if there is ever a dispute about his identity) by the fact that he has Sea-Weed growing on him at the fork in his body."

I felt a great elation when I was given this appointment. I whistled the secret coded whistle to my ship, and it came, invisible to all except myself. I stepped out of an upper window (cries of the persons below: 'He will fall and be killed', and cries of other persons below: 'No, he will not fall and be killed: he is a prophet and one of the prophets').

And yet we did nearly fall. "Something is wrong with our ship, my love," my wife said. But the point is that we entered the ship and did not fall to the ground below.

I and the Grand-Dame my wife entered the ship and sped away, still invisible, to Bassorah Rock. There we picked up a crew and a magician-navigator.

And in the Baghdad that we left behind us for a while, the new Caliph Al-Amin convoked various parliaments and councils after the sun went down, and worked all night drawing up his admirable code of laws. This was one of the greatest codes ever on any of the worlds, and it can only be regretted that it would never be put into effect.

The Direst Voyage Ever Ship Did Sail

“Something is wrong with our ship, my love,” said my wife the Grand Dame of the Seven Musics as we became an ocean-surface craft off-shore in the Arabian Ocean. “Something is wrong with the ship, and I can’t quite identify it.”

“What could possibly go wrong with the best ship that ever lived?” I asked her. “The ship is on waiting-drift, on ‘invisible-anchor’ as we say, and it is on number two alert while we consult with our Magician-Navigator. At this moment our ship is supposed to be doing nothing at all. How can a ship be doing nothing-at-all wrongly?”

“I still say there is something wrong with the ship,” she insisted stubbornly. “Ah, that was a sulk. It’s sulking. But there is still something very wrong with this ship. Believe me. I am always sure in mind and hand and foot.” And then my wife stumbled on the perfectly level deck and fell flat on her face.

“Perhaps something is wrong with your wife, Master Copperbottom,” our ship purred in that manner that some passengers have found slightly offensive. But I always say that total competence (a characteristic of our ship) has the right to be slightly offensive.

Our Magician-Navigator came on board. No, our Magician-Navigator appeared on board in that tricky way that they have. He was slightly translucent at his first appearance, but he had been completely invisible before. They use such tricks to try to impress their clients.

“Is there doubt here, is there doubt here?” this navigator asked in the way they have. “Doubt is the foremost obstacle to good navigation. I detect a modicum of doubt on this ship, and it is centered in your wife, Master Copperbottom. Would you be so good as to get rid of your wife?”

“Permanently or temporarily, Magician?”

“Permanently would be the more permanent solution. But I’ll take what I can get.”

“No. I’ll not get rid of her at all. Never. I like her.”

“Then I can only guarantee a little bit above ninety-nine percent accuracy while the doubt and the wife hang like clouds in this wardroom. But I will do what I can do.”

The Magician-Navigator materialized a great globe or crystal ball on the wardroom table. Yes, it was almost the conventional crystal ball full of colors and ever-changing clouds. And it was also a miniature-in-depth of Gaea-Earth in total detail (every atom and molecule reproduced in miniature) and it was capable of reproductions in other time contexts. It showed selected scenes and situations as they were yesterday, as they would be tomorrow, and as they were right now.

Our ship had whispered the information about the amazing globe and the amazing Magician to me (the electronic, inside-the-head whispering of our ship was itself amazing), and our ship threw in the opinion: “This guy is good, and this guy’s globe is good!”

“I can focus on anything you wish,” the Magician-Navigator told me. “I can let you see anything anywhere, whether it is ordinarily visible or not. I can even let you see thoughts, but they will be in bodied and symbolic form. However, I will be able to interpret them to you. I can let you hear hidden things. It is well known that Ifrits and kindred spirits have such acute hearing that they can overhear conversations in the heavens. Well, I can let you overhear conversations in hell, and I can assure you that they’re more pertinent to the purpose of your voyage. You can hear conversations between any of the damned souls there, and I can let you hear conversations between elementals that are neither persons nor souls at all. I can let you examine the innermost structure of metals, those of the Iron Doors of Hell for instance. If even one atom of those doors has traitorous inclination, you can know it and spot the trouble at once. If there are flaws or weaknesses in the molecular binding of this iron, I can make it declare itself. I can navigate your ship through the underground and submarine channels right

to those infernal doors. If even a mouse has passed out of those doors within the past fifty thousand years, I can locate it for you."

"Something is wrong with our ship, my love," my good wife said once more. Then the chair she was sitting in went to pieces and dumped her on the metallic deck.

"Something is wrong with your wife, Master Copperbottom," the ship said. "Perhaps I should immobilize her and make repairs. If we have the parts, I could have her functioning properly again in six weeks."

"Don't be droll, Ship," I said. The ship had always been on terms of friendly banter with us, but today the tone seemed a little bit extreme and false.

"The new Caliph Al-Amin is mistaken, of course," the Magician-Navigator was saying as he gazed into the pulsing red fires that are the hot core of Gaea-Earth. "The souls and devils in hell are plainly there for ever. Not one of them has escaped since their being locked up there fifty thousand years ago. Those he mentioned in his private briefing to you (he *thought* it was private), such as the beautiful and gracious Lady Narkos, such as his own father Harun al-Rashid the Forever-Caliph, they are not hellish spirits at all. They are benign spirits from benign worlds far distant. They come to the Five Worlds to bring joy and delight. They enhance life. I can steer your ship to the very jaws of hell, but what purpose would it serve?"

"It would let me examine the situation with my own eyes. I have a royal commission to do just that."

"Oh, but in the crystal miniature of the world here there are eyes one million times as seeing as your own eyes. I can let you see with these much stronger and much more discerning eyes. And it is unpleasant physically to follow the watery, underground channel all the way to the iron doors. The water is near boiling there. 'twould boil you like a lobster, Sindbad. But if you insist, then of course you *will* be boiled like a lobster."

"Not only is there something wrong with our ship, my love, but there is also something wrong with our Magician-Navigator also," my wife stated stoutly. "Who verified the Magician-Navigator anyhow?"

"The *ship* verified him, Grand Dame My Wife," I said.

"A vicious circle, and I never liked them. Not only is there something wrong with our ship, but there is something wrong with our tricky Navigator also," my wife would not let go of the idea. "And what is wrong with our ship is that it *isn't* our ship. There has been a switch or substitution, my love. We were never in *this* ship before. It is a false and faithless copy of our true ship. Treachery, treachery! Crewmen, crewmen, come to the battle!"

But both the Ship and the Magician-Navigator burst into laughter.

"Ask who selected the crewmen, Lady Tumblehome," the Ship purred obnoxiously. "And the answer is that myself the ship selected the crew." Then the False Ship clamped leg-irons and manacles on myself and my wife.

"I am the perfect facsimile of your Ship, of course," the Ship purred. "I neglected no detail. I love myself when I pull perfect jobs like this one. I can imitate anything. On my last assignment, I imitated a small planet and got space ships to land on me. But I unwittingly destroyed them at the Show-Down Hour. I didn't know that space ships were so delicate. We need space ships, and I know how one works now, having become one of them in all details. We need space ships because we are the Center-of-the-Earth-Gaea People, and Gaea does not yet have space ships of her own. We want to go back to some of those worlds we came from before we were locked up, and space ships are the only way to get there."

"You are a driveling Ifrit," I said. "But I cannot set them too low because I suspect that I am part Ifrit myself. But all the Ifrits are half-witted and scatter-brained in spite of their extraordinary powers. All the Ifrits are —"

"Master Copperbottom, there is no such thing as 'All the Ifrits'," our Magician-Navigator interrupted. "Ah, how does it feel to be ambushed completely by a half-wit? How does it feel to have leg-irons and manacles put on you by half-wits who outsmart you at every turn? But I say there is no such thing as 'All the Ifrits' for the reason that the fire-creatures in the center of the Earth have genera but not species, or rather each species consists of one individual only. This is the case with every clan of Angels and Devils and Ifrits and Genii; there is only one of each to a species. Theirs is the condition of almost total variety. Only the lower animals and the humans have very many individuals in each species, in the case of humans billions and billions of them. It rather cheapens you, does it not, to be the result of such mass production?"

"And how are you yourself produced then, fire-creature from the center of Gaea, for I

assume that you are one of them? How were you born?"

"I was produced in a way totally peculiar and unique," the Magician-Navigator said ("So was I," the Ship said), "One hundred billion of us fire-creatures in the Center of the World, at the latest estimates, and no two of us had the same origin, or even the same *kind* of origin. You can't boggle your human mind enough to get the faintest idea of it. Oh the colossal imagination that went into the origin of even the least of us! Even human persons, when they are damned and so become damned souls, must be 'born again' in a unique way, in a way that has never been done before. How could anybody who has caught even a glimpse of the endless variety of damnation be satisfied with the cloying sameness of salvation?"

"A good question. Where is our Ship?"

"Nowhere. No longer in common space, I mean," the Magician-Navigator said. "It is in a removed condition-and-place, considering the narrow options that are left to us. 'If you can't beat them, join them', your Ship uttered that cliché and then died. But it should have taken the advice earlier. I suspect that there will not be left of your Ship a timber upon a timber. It will be a no-thing. Madam Grand-Dame Tumblehome, where are *your* questions? I had heard that wives were very talkative. But now that the cow-chips are down, where are your words?"

"Have you considered that you may have the wrong people?" my wife the Grand-Dame asked easily, "and that you may have subverted the wrong ship? Who do you believe that we are anyhow?"

"You are Sindbad the Sailor and his Wife, and no trickery that you can devise can make you be anyone else," the False Ship stated.

"I believe that in the ancient 'Book of Tests' there is a test for the real Sindbad," my Grand-Dame suggested.

"Certainly, certainly," spoke the Magician-Navigator. "The True Sindbad will have True Sea-Weed growing on him. A false Sindbad will have False Sea-Weed or none at all growing on him. Did you not run the test as a matter of course, Ship?"

"Ah, no, as a matter of fact, I didn't," the Ship stuttered a bit. "But I am sure of the identities, and I can run the test in an instant."

"Do so, in this instant," the Magician-Navigator ordered.

"Well?" I asked with rising intonation a moment later.

"Well?" my wife asked with still more rising intonation two moments later.

"Well?" the Magician-Navigator asked with towering intonation three moments later.

"Something is wrong," the False Ship said. "This is a False Sindbad. How could I have made a mistake like that?"

"Locate the True Sindbad then, Incompetent Pseudo-Ship," the Magician ordered. "Where is the True Sindbad?"

"In fact he is quite near," the False Ship said. "That's what fooled me. He was even nearer when I picked up this False Sindbad. But now the True Sindbad comes closer to us. He is coming in this direction. He is bearing down on us."

"Latch on to him. Do not lose him," the Magician ordered.

"Is it better or worse for me to be the True Sindbad or the False Sindbad?" I asked.

"False Mariner, you speak as if there were a choice. Will you still ask questions when each of them brings you closer to extinction?" the Magician inquired. "There is no 'or' in this matter. The Ship, when it puts its mind carefully to a thing, does not make mistakes."

"How odd!" my wife commented. "The Ship of which this Ship boasts it is a perfect simile made plenty of mistakes. I suppose we would have discarded it for this failing long ago, but it had become like one of the family."

This seemed to astonish both the False Ship and the Navigator.

"For *any* ship to make mistakes would be worse than incompetence," the Magician-Navigator protested. "That would throw the onus back on the Navigator. To refrain from making mistakes is the plain business of any ship. Ship, there is a jumble here. Is the fallible Ship indeed out of common space and in a removed condition? On what ship is the True Sindbad bearing down on us? Is the True Sindbad coming on the fallible Ship that makes mistakes?"

"This is irrational, Magician-Navigator," the Facsimile Ship said. "There is apparently something wrong with my readings. No, it seems that the true Sinbad is *not* coming on the fallible Ship on which I modeled myself, and yet that fallible Ship is coming in the company of him. It is captained by a person who knows how to improvise, and improvise, and improvise again beyond all measure. There is something unreal about her."

“About *her* do you say, Ship? Who all are coming?”

“Two ships with ramblunctious crews. There are new things brewing on both of them. The captain of the old fallible Ship is showing almost explosive creativity; as is the captain of the strange ship which captain is the True Sindbad. The fallible Ship has somehow been snatched back into common space and out of the removed condition. And the other ship, the Ship that the True Sindbad is coming on, it isn't a Sindbad Class Ship at all. It plots out as one of the queerest contraptions ever devised.

“The categorical name for that type of craft is ‘The Almost-Anything Machine’. Magician, the inventor of that ‘Almost-Anything Machine’ had access to an open-ended system of analytics which we somehow lost fifty thousand years ago. The amazing inventor of that ‘Almost-Anything Machine’ in which the True Sindbad is coming has avoided both the Klonthut Dead-End and the Cartesian Dead-End of Analytics. Think of that for a moment! He has access to open-ended power. In a showdown he is categorically stronger than we are. We must have more information on this True Sindbad who previously had not had a reputation for being intelligent. Or we must avoid the show-down if we find that we really are out-manned. Is it possible that the True Sindbad is also the inventor of the ‘Almost-Anything Machine’? We must have more information from somebody. And there are only two somebodies here for us to work on. This looks like a torture job.”

I noticed that the leg-irons and manacles in which I was clamped were becoming very hot. Very, very hot. I could smell my own flesh burning and I could smell my wife's flesh burning. Her burning flesh has a more savory smell than does mine. She eats more fruit.

“It is only the torture, dear,” she said in the private language that we have devised for just the two of us. (I didn't know whether either the Facsimile Ship or the Magician-Navigator could crack our not-very-difficult code.) “We must appear to pay no attention to the pain at all,” my wife said. “And perhaps they will give up on it.”

“No, that's the wrong way,” I moaned. “Let's carry on and scream a lot. If we seem to take no notice, they may turn the torture up, and then still higher up. But if we scream a lot, if we swoon insensate, if we babble into meaningless jabber, they may turn it down a little bit so they can at least question us.” So we screamed a lot, rolled our eyes back into our heads, swooned insensate, and babbled in meaningless jabber.

“Oh, don't act so childish, you two!” the Magician-Navigator groused disgustedly. “You two are experienced persons of several worlds: you are into the two adventurous trades of spying and marin— What's the word for following the mariner's trade?”

“Marinating,” said my wife.

“Yes, marinating. You two are in the dangerous catch-all businesses, so certainly you have both been put to the torture before. Play fair! Do you always scream so irritatingly and carry on so outlandishly under torture?”

“Oh, you haven't heard anything yet,” my wife said. “We can turn it up as high as we want to. For instance —” My wife began to scream very loudly and obnoxiously. I myself was shocked by the painful loudness and the bad taste of it.

“Stop, stop, stop!” the Ship and the Magician-Navigator protested together; and then the Magician continued in exasperation. “You two win that trick, but you will still lose the war. We will turn down the heat till you are merely uncomfortable. Now then, answer some questions. Who and Where is the Real Sindbad?”

“I am the Real, the Original, the Only, the True Sindbad,” I swore.

“And he's right here,” my wife added.

“If you are the True Sindbad, why do you not have the genuine Sea-Weed, that sign of the True Sindbad, growing on you?”

“Like Samson, a hero here on Gaea in an earlier day, I was shorn of my pride by a woman, or by a mechanism who passed as a woman,” I said. “It was a shameful event in my life, and I'd rather not talk about it.”

“And yet we *will* talk about it, False Sindbad,” the Magician-Navigator stated. “Who then is the person that the ship now reads as the True Sindbad? Who is the one who *does* have the genuine Sea-Weed growing on him?”

“He is only a simple-minded kid. Don't give him a thought.”

“But we do give him a thought, especially since he is now coming towards us at an ever swifter speed. How does he have the Sea-Weed that is your signature growing on him?”

“Oh, it was implanted on him as a sort of — as a sort of joke, I think. And his ship is a joke. All of us spies who came to Gaea in respectable ships laughed at his grotesque craft. It is

a burlesque of all good ships.”

“Ship, Facsimile Ship, I believe that this ‘burlesque of all good ships’ is just what we want,” the Magician-Navigator declared. “Could you make yourself into a facsimile of this burlesque ship? If all the spies treat it with derision, then it may be easier to slip it through the bunch of them. We’ll do that, after these two spies here have been obliterated. Can you copy it, Ship?”

“Sure I can. I can facsimile the thing. Just let me get my tentacles on the thing and I’ll copy it totally in every detail. Then I’ll be a real open-ended device.”

“Why should you entities of the Dark Principality want space ships?” I asked them. “*Morturi te interrogant*, ‘we who are about to die’ ask you this, out of curiosity only.”

“We want space ships for the same reason you spies have come to prevent our having them,” the Magician-Navigator said in his voice that was as transparent and loosely woven as himself. “We want to break the quarantine that has been imposed on Gaea-Earth for these long millennia. And you do not want it broken. We want to export ourselves and our effects to others of the Five Worlds, to others of the Eighteen Worlds, to others of the Billion Worlds. It is intolerable that we should be imprisoned in the center of Gaea-Earth for fifty thousand years, or even that we should be imprisoned on its surface (for a few thousands of us have gotten that far).”

“We want to tell our side. We want to export our side. All good and no evil makes the universe a dull place. Do you outworlders, coming to Gaea, not taste a tang that you have been missing? It is the interesting taste of evil, the thing that keeps the worlds from going completely blah, the thing that keeps Gaea from being as bland as your own worlds. There are no native space-ships on Gaea-Earth, or we would have long since copied them and been on our explosive way. And we have not till today been able to get hold of a visiting space ship. But now we are latching onto the ships of the spies whom we enticed here.”

“Magician, I see now that the strange burlesque ship which I am to copy is of Gaea-Earth, but from Gaea-of-the-future,” the Ship said.

“And thus far we have been able to snatch things from the Gaea-Future most imperfectly.”

“This time, Magician-Navigator, it will be a more nearly perfect snatch,” the Ship vaunted. “Oh, I can hardly wait to get my tentacles on that Ship of the Open-Ended Analytics. And apparently I won’t have long to wait. It comes faster and faster.”

Sharp pain will sometimes sharpen the senses. My own hearing had been enhanced by the short and very sharp pain of the white-hot shackle torture. I have long suspected that I am part Ifrit. I knew that the Ifrits in their full powers have such acute hearing that they can overhear conversations in the heavens, or in hell.

Now I realized that I was able to hear a conversation, or a monolog rather, in my own unreconstructed ship. It was Madame Scheherazade talking feverishly to herself in the throes of creative activity. She, I now realized, was the mysterious person who was captaining my old ship, the ship that was now rushing towards us along with the ship of Ali ben Raad (that goofy kid) (John Thunderson) (the False Real Sindbad who had stolen Sea-Weed growing on him). Ah, what a pair they were! Scheherazade (I had become fairly well acquainted with her in the last day) always wrote out loud and thought out loud. And now I was overhearing her out-loud thoughts.

The Ship In The Bottle

Yes, these are the flaming and enabling words of Madam Scheherazade:

If I don't learn more about this creative business every day my name isn't Scheherazade Carrillo y Krynski. I have become a split-schizo and I can no longer tell what is my own invention and what properly belongs to the exocosmos, the world-unmeddled-with-by-me. But one half or the other of my split person can always do anything that needs doing. Ordinarily I could no more drive a space ship than nothing. I failed a plain driver's license examination four times the year I lived in Dover Delaware. But as soon as I got into this space ship of Essindibad Copperbottom I added a couple of refinements to its driving mechanism, and now I can drive it as easily as I drove that Ford Frolic the year that I lived in Edmond Oklahoma.

And these crewmen that I picked up at Bassorah Rock, they were the rottenest bunch of cut-throats I ever saw anywhere. But then I sprinkled a few adjectives over them and clarified their characters; and now they have become upstanding men and so loyal that they'd follow me to hell.

“— which, by the way, Miss Scheherazade, is exactly where we're going if we keep the course you've laid out,” one of them just said. “It'll be nice for you to know though, that, if the situation calls for it, we can again become the bloodiest bunch of cutthroats in the world, in your service of course. But anyhow we can ride high in the water and skim along on the trip to hell. There isn't any return journey from there that we have to carry provisions for.”

I should know what is going to happen, but I don't. I am not at all sound on the history of Mesopotamia in Ninth Century. I realize that I made a lot of it up, but there must have been an armature of reality for me to hang those globs of fictional clay on. I took ‘Sculpture Techniques from Clay to Marble’ in junior college the year that I lived in Shreveport Louisiana which is why I use comparisons like that.

My favorite historian (because he is so droll and whimsical) (and because hardly anyone has ever heard of him) was the Roman Rabelais, Atrox Fabulinus. Writing in Rome about the year two-hundred, he carried his History of the World forward to the year one thousand. He had the world end in the year one thousand, and he had convincing explanations why it would do so. And from the year two hundred to about the year six-twenty-two his history was remarkably accurate. Though he died around the year two ten, he named correctly the Emperors and Empresses in both Rome and Constantinople for more than four hundred years after that. And he got the Frankish rulers named and described right up to the year one thousand.

Only in the Near East did he go wrong, for he had never heard of Mohammed or the Moslems. The Emperor of Constantinople continued to rule Syria and Egypt and Asia Minor and Mesopotamia and a slice of Persia too, right up until the year one thousand when the world ended.

And I've the feeling that Atrox Fabulinus was correct, that there really wasn't any Mohammed of the Moslems (the very idea of them violates historical unity), and that the world really did end in the year one thousand. That was the correct version of history.

It is only in an alternate and not very substantial version of history, the version that I am unfortunate enough to live in, though, that we find the anomaly of the Moslems and the necessity to continue the world beyond its true ending date because of the impossible muddle that things had gotten themselves into. In this alternate version, the world couldn't get neat and decent enough to be ended. There'd have been too much of it left over.

Unfortunately I was born in the twentieth century of an historical detour, and not in that correct and main version of history which probably had no twentieth century. My only worry (no, no, I have a thousand and one worries), one of my worries is that my alternate universe

may paint the real universe. We know that, in the real universe, all the evil and dubious spirits were locked into the iron center of Gaea-Earth: these were the evil and dubious spirits of *all* the worlds, and they were imprisoned in that inescapable prison. But, in my alternate history of the universe, very many of these dubious spirits *have* escaped from this lockup, and multitudes of them are escaping at this very instant.

The folk memory of these dubious spirits is a personal memory of each of the escapees: it is the escaping from a bottle after a confinement of thousands of years, for they are Genii. It is the escaping by making themselves very small, for they are size-changers and shape-changers. But some of them are always working to enlarge the holes so that the bigger and still bigger devils may come out. So far, even in our own version of the universe, it is just our own Gaea-World that is tainted by the escape of these spirits; and these spirits put on a pretty likeable appearance whenever they wish. But they try constantly to reach the other worlds.

Will it matter if they do reach and corrupt the other worlds? Does anything matter when one is in only an alternate universe? But I suppose that my alternate universe theory is a little bit simplistic.

Possibly we will not know till noon of the last day which was the real universe and which were the ten, or ten thousand, alternates. No, that is too simplistic also. I may have to scrap a lot of that theory and go back and redo it. But I want to keep the part where there was one version of the cosmos (and I'll call it the Atrox Fabulinus version) in which the world really did end in the year one thousand (and probably all ten thousand worlds ended at the same time) and I want to keep the other part (and it's easier to keep, since I live in it) where the world was in too much confusion even to think about ending in the year one thousand. This puts a premium on confusion.

But I don't have to make up my mind right now. On the particular little time tour I am on, the world has almost two hundred years to go before it gets to the year one thousand.

I am analogous to Plutarch, I believe. The great characters that he created in his *Lives* still live in classic memory. As to those I have created, I believe that they are equally great, in a devious way. And as to their living and surviving in the corporate memory, we will see, we will see.

Ah, we come to the wind-down now, possibly to a bloody wind-down, of the Thirteenth Voyage of Sindbad. And I still don't have any good idea of how it should end. Brain, brain, why do you fail me now! Other thing, other thing, you whatever-thing within me that I turn to so often when my brain does fail me, it is now time for one of your flashes of brilliance. Oh, absolutely it is! Shine, thing, shine!

Another thing bothers me: does God need help in running His Universe? No, of course He doesn't need help. If He needed help, He wouldn't be God.

Why does He solicit help then if He doesn't need it? Quite often I can feel His soliciting help even from His handmaid myself. Well, He solicits this not-quite-essential help because He loves to deal in these paradoxes; and He does it because being God He doesn't have to give any reasons.

Like Harun al-Rashid (may his tribe decrease) God often goes masked and disguised among his people and plays amusing tricks and jokes on them. There is a bas-relief of the 'Masked Christ' on the South Side (outside) of St. Anselm's Church in Cincinnati; but I'm the only one who understands it and who knows who it is. The year I lived in Cincinnati I went to see that old man who had carved the figure that I have named the 'Masked Christ' and he said he didn't know who it was, that he had simply been impelled to carve it. The name he cut on it was '*Il Mascherato*' or 'The Masked One'. It was the winos around there (under the bas-relief there is a niche with a bench where they sit sometimes) who first told me that it was really the 'Masked Christ'.

I wonder if I could have French Lilacs in a vase on the wardroom table here. Oh yes, thanks, somebody. That was quick. No sooner fictionalized than done. But, um, um, are they really what I wanted? French Lilacs are always prettier in memory than in fact.

Oh, let's change them to Jasmines. That's it. They are a good flower for the night time. Their fragrance is better than their color, but nobody can have everything. I believe I'll change them again though. I'll shoot for the rarest of all blooms this time, Black Roses. Oh, I love them. Thanks! Black Roses shall be the symbol of this black battle that we enter almost immediately.

And now I wonder whether I couldn't do something about this subterranean exterior world, this stygian underworld through which we're sailing. It has light sufficient, considering

that it is near midnight. But, like the first three days in the beginning, it is light without a localized source. Let us just have a small sun or moon in the low rock sky that covers us. Oh, oh, yes, that is well done, in an evil sort of way. It's an ashen, garish moon, eerie beyond compare. It's what we call a 'Ghul Moon' around here when it shines on the lonesome desert.

Other Thing, Other Thing in my head that takes over when my brain abdicates responsibility, take over now, Other Thing. The little moon is a moon to cut throats by, it is a moon to board ships by, it is a moon to walk planks by. It is a moon to be ambushed by flashing knives by. Oh, how are our sails so full of wind on this windless subterranean stream of an ocean? How do we scoot along with so great a speed. Other Thing, Other Thing, we are really operating now! This ship has a crack astern and it will break open if rammed there. And the ship that is a copy of this ship will also have a crack astern, and it *will* break open when rammed on that copied ship, and it *will* be rammed there. Both this ship and its copy have hard noses, but this ship shall ram first. And then there will be the joy of slippery blood on slippery decks. A little bit of 'Slippery Blood Music' for the background, please, just to set the mood. Oh, that's perfect!

Oh, those damned dragons! They're in the whole channel, in the whole cavern! The presumptuous oafs! They always want to get in the act. More tedious than dragons! Oh, but I have an idea now! What I need is twelve fair-size bottles and one big bottle, bottles of jazzy blue or green tint, and with popper-proof corks. With those, we can win this battle.

And a little slippery blood *smell* now, whatever subservient powers they are who supply props to me. No, of course it isn't the same smell as all blood. Slippery blood has its own piquant smell. If I were an Ifrit-sort-of-Ghost assigned to smell effects, I'd know the difference.

What, Blue Moon, are you talking to me with your new projecting voice box? Sure I'm going to hit her. I'll damned well hit her amidships and a little bit aft, and she'll crack open like a ripe melon. You and Kid Thunderson want first hit, do you? Let's see you beat me to it then, kids!

Say, Blue Moon, tell Thunderson to wind you up very tight right now. We can't have you getting run down on us in the middle of the fray. And, Blue Moon, you don't have twelve fair-size bottles and one big bottle, do you? Of jazzy blue or green glass (no other will do). And with popper-proof corks. Well, do you? Look and see. It's important.

Oh, you already know exactly what's on the ship, do you? You do have twelve fair-sized bottles with popper proof corks, but no big bottle? Well, that helps a lot. Set the twelve out in the open uncorked. I wonder whether Essindibad Copperbottom has such a big bottle with such a cork on the false ship he's on? Likely not. And I don't know how to contact him. I can hear him if he says something, but how can he hear me to know that I need a big bottle? Oh, I'll think of something.

Yes, Essindibad Copperbottom can hear you, Scheherazade. But being able to overhear monologs by somebody like Scheherazade is not an unmixed blessing. I looked out, and the tedious dragons had indeed filled the underground ocean waterway. They would hinder any naval activity and might indeed make it impossible. Anyhow, the 'Other Thing' that took over when Scheherazade's brains abdicated in her had taken over in her now. I have always loved a reckless sea-battle myself, but now my wife and I were manacled prisoners amidships and a little bit aft, right where the copied crack in the ship would allow it to be burst asunder. I could see the crack plainly. I should have had the hull-crack in my own ship fixed long ago, but how did I know that it would be copied? It was right where the ship we were prisoned on would be rammed, either by my own ship now captained by Madam Scheherazade or by the 'Open-Ended Analytics Almost-Anything Ship' of John Thunderson Ali ben Raad and his mechanical bride Blue Moon. I wondered for what reason Scheherazade wanted the tinted bottles with the popper-proof corks. Well, there was one on my own ship that she was captaining now. And she'd said that she could hear me, but she didn't know that I could overhear her.

"Scheherazade, there is a big, blue bottle not three feet from you if you're sitting in the captain's chair," I called. "It's in an otherwise-empty bilge-bucket at your left under the wardroom table. Whatever you want it for, it's there. And it does have a popper-proof cork. I have to sign off now. I'm assaulted again."

"Tear his tongue out, Magician," howled the false ship that I was in.

"But of course I will," the Magician-Navigator laughed. "It is these little pleasures that make the job worth while. Oh, on alert now though! He'll not escape, and I'll tear out his

tongue later. We are going through difficult water for the moment. I believe it is some of those tedious dragons we're cutting through. And Oh, Oh, we are rammed amidships and a little bit aft!"

"Burst your bonds, Sindbad Copperbottom!" my wife the Grand Dame cried out in her wonderful and now blood-thirsty voice. "All great heroes can burst their bonds in the moment of supreme crisis."

I tried it, and I could not burst them. And in that moment we were rammed, amidships and a little bit aft. The ship burst asunder and began immediately to sink.

"Go topside myself. Go topside, the crew!" the Magician-Navigator called out with authority in his voice. "We'll board and capture the two attacking ships even as this one sinks under our heels. Topside, all! Topside, Ship! Oh, that's funny, Ship. How could a ship go topside of itself? You must stay here and drown in yourself, Ship, along with False Sindbad and his buxom wife. Die creeps, die!"

The Magician-Navigator and all the false crewmen snatched weapons from the bulkhead (those bolo-knives such as are used when boarding ships in battle), and they all scampered topside for gore and glory.

"Burst your bonds, my love!" my wife cried out again. "If you are the True Sindbad and the True Hero then you will be able to burst them. They're only iron."

But I could not burst them.

"Burst your own bonds, wife!" I cried in exasperation. And my wife did burst her bonds. Then she shook all the jags of broken iron off her and stood up. And I was seized with fury, shame, jealousy of her heroism, and the strongest resolve I ever felt since my fourth voyage-adventure.

I burst my bonds, leg clamps, manacles, chains, all. Only a True Sindbad, only a True Hero could have burst them. And my wife and I took the last two bolo-knives from their hooks on the bulkhead and rushed up to top-deck which was already awash with midnight salt-water. And then we set ourselves to slay or be slain. But we were right at the precincts of Hell Itself, our waves and wake sloshing against the hot and drafty iron doors of Infernity. And before the precincts, one does not pass from life to death nor from death to life except by diabolical orders.

"We must get a little order and system in this butchery," Madam Scheherazade was singing out from the hatches of my own Tried-and-True Ship, with its great crack amidships and a little bit aft. She had set the twelve fair-sized bottles and the one large bottle in a row on the foredeck, and something was creating the illusion that all of them were much larger than they really were.

And on the other attacking ship, the Mechanical Wife Blue Moon had set a victrola to playing genuine Chicago style Slippery-Blood Music. John Thunderson, whatever his other faults, would never have put to space and time in his 'Almost-Everything Space-and-Time-Ship' without a victrola and a good stack of 'Slippery Blood' records.

So we hacked and were hacked with the Bolo-knives, and we entered into the honest joy of irregular combat on the blood-slippery decks. The dragons who were in the way everywhere, opened their mouths so wide that they seemed able to swallow any and all of the three ships. Indeed, one of them did swallow the entire False Ship replica of my True Ship, but in that moment we had all leapt clear of it to the foredeck of my own True Ship. And then it was kill or be killed.

I noticed then that the dragon that had swallowed the False Ship had spewed it up again. And somehow, though that ship now looked even more disreputable than it had when it had burst asunder, yet it had also acquired an aura of embattled heroism. Being an accurate copy of my own heroic ship it could hardly avoid having an heroic aspect.

"False Ship, False Ship," Scheherazade was calling to it, "there is another fate for you. When you have been swallowed into the maw that I have in mind for you, you may look back on your short stay in the dragon's maw with affection." And then she addressed herself to her crewmen.

"Retreat, Crewmen, in the way that I have told you," the intrepid Scheherazade called out. How she had told her crewmen to retreat I did not know, but they disappeared completely from my vision. They were gone, clear gone.

"After them, after them," the Magician-Navigator howled out. "They cannot escape us. They have withdrawn into those curious blue rooms on the foredeck. After them with your bold Bolos! Kill them kill them!"

And the eleven crewmen from my false ship along with the Magician-Navigator rushed with their drawn blades into the twelve curious blue rooms on the foredeck, which rooms happened to be the twelve fair-sized blue bottles, somehow enlarged by an enabling imagination. Ah, they rushed in murderously. But there were only illusions of crewmen, and not the crewmen themselves, waiting for them in those straited places.

And then the Magician-Navigator and the False Crewmen were in the bottles, stunned by the impact of their own headlong rush, Scheherazade and John Thunderson and the mechanical wife Blue Moon slammed the popper-proof corks into each of the bottles. And immediately those twelve blue rooms diminished to their proper fair-sized bottle size. All those murderous crewmen were imprisoned in bottles, and so was the Magician-Navigator.

But the Magician-Navigator found his wits and his voice quickly. "The first minutes are critical," I heard his voice, somewhat muffled by him being in the tightly corked bottle, I heard his voice being raised in introspective thought. "The first minute or so in the bottle is always critical, for if you don't get out in that first minute you may not get out in a thousand years. But we are not whipped yet. Ship, Ship, we are not whipped yet, and you are still sailing under orders. It is not for naught that the dragon spewed you up again. I order you now to sail high in the water right at this damnable craft, to heave yourself up and come on top of it on this foredeck, and to barge right into the large blue room which I believe is the headquarters and brain-room of this tricky cabal of persons. At us, Ship, and smash and enter!"

And it was with a terrible clash and clatter and rending of sea-planks (and a rending of my heart also, for some of those sea-planks were those of my own true ship), with a terrible buffeting and roaring and crushing, that the false ship climbed athwart the true, and barged right into the large and mysterious blue room which it believed was our headquarters and brain center. And when the false ship was in that large and mysterious blue room, myself and all of us slapped the popper-proof cork into the large blue bottle, and we had one of the biggest (and someday to be the most famous) ships-in-a-bottle ever.

Then, ever faithful to any assignment given us, we all inspected the gates of hell, the great iron doors that the dragons were crowded against. I never saw such fat dragons in my life. What were they puffed up with?

"What are you fellows doing crowding around here?" I demanded of them.

"It's one of our favorite places," a leader of the beasts told me. "We love the hot fumes that come through the holes in the doors. We love the fire. We are not ordinarily so fire-eating as is alleged against us, but we do love to swallow the globs of fire that creep through the big doors. Try some. They're wonderful."

"Our worry is that you might let some of the devils out with your meddling and milling around here," I said.

"No chance of that," the dragon snorted. "The devils stay a ways back when we are at the doors. We swallow devils right through the holes in the walls. They know that and are wary of us."

"There's something not quite right about that explanation and about this place," Scheherazade said. "I'll think what is wrong by and by. I only hope I don't think of it too late."

"If there's something wrong with this place, then let's get out of here," I said reasonably enough. "Let's go back to the tall city of Baghdad and have a 'triumph' staged for us. And I don't trust you dragons here. I'll not leave you behind us. Come along with us now, come on!"

So we all went back to Baghdad in my good ship and John Thunderson's comical ship. We came to the Holy City at earliest dawn for accolade, ovation, triumph, exultation, glory, parade, and pomp. And three hundred giant dragons (What made them so fat? With what were they stuffed?) marched at our heels and gave color to the parade.

More Tedious Than Dragons

Of course the new Caliph Al-Amin gave himself the chief place in the ovation. He needed it. His popularity had been slow in coming to its zenith, though it's true that he had been caliph for less than a full day. He hadn't a magnetic personality. He hadn't a chemical aura like that of his boy-father Harun al-Rashid. Some of his reforms, in especial his spoken attacks on Lady Narkos, turned the people off. They seemed in bad taste. Lady Narkos, she of the lilac-colored dreams and the pleasant mists, she who threw her purple-golden cloak over every bright dome of Holy Baghdad and made them numinous, she who created the mirages which alone made life worth living, she was not to be slighted by any Caliph.

And the boy-father Harun al-Rashid had detracted somewhat from Al-Amin's popularity by his jibing and japing and burlesquing of him. And now that boy-father, who had become Caliph Emeritus, had to be in that great Ovation-Parade, had to make himself the effective center of it. There was no way to keep him out.

He wore a suit of clown motley, green shoes with turned-up toes, and a green wig. His mask was a depiction of his own face as it had been until two days ago. But now it was said that there was something very wrong with his more recent face. It almost was no longer that of a boy. It had gone, skipping young manhood and middle manhood, to the face of an uncommonly old man. But that remained rumor. None of us had seen his aged face, nor would we ever.

Some of the servitors of the new Caliph Al-Amin had protested to him about the clownishness of the boy-father. "It is all right," the new Caliph said. "These things are allowed against his death." Everybody understood that the Boy-Caliph Harun al-Rashid was in the last day or two of his life.

There had been some opposition to the Ovation-Triumph-Exultation-Glory-Parade-Pomposity, and part of that opposition was from the other Master Spies, those who had *not* been appointed by the Caliph Al-Amin 'to take ship and find passage under the Earth and prevent traitors from opening the iron hell-doors under the Earth, and to verify that those iron doors remained safely closed against the Powers of Evil'. Well, every new Caliph on coming into office had the iron doors verified as to their safety, and this Certification was always part of the Ovation-Parade of the new Caliph. There was not usually this pettiness against it. I will not attribute this pettiness to jealousy on the part of the other Master Spies, nor to any sort of bad faith on their part, but only to their being uninformed about the situation. And I attribute it to the 'Spirit of Suspicion' that is always a part of the make-up of second-rate Master Spies. These were my best friends on this world, but they would not be my best friends back home.

The Master Spy Citizen Heifritz said that the business of the Iron Doors of Hell was all a hoax and a superstition, that the iron doors that we had visited were only the rusted doors of an old canal lock that had been silted over with the rising of the plains around them and the erosion of the mountains above them both of which cause silting and rising of rivers and submerging of canals. And he said that the devils behind those iron doors (if indeed there were any devils imprisoned there) were no more than common spirits (albeit unclean spirits), and that doors of iron or other material could not be an impediment to their coming or going, though there might be impediments of some other sort. He said that the whole adventure reeked of boyishness and ignorance.

The Master Spy Alexander of Astrobe said the so-called 'Main Gates' underground near Baghdad, and the two smaller gates which were carried in the Caliph's 'Inventory of Properties Located on Subterranean Waters' were but three of the more than nine hundred 'gates of hell' located in the Caliphate itself. He said that he had seen that very morning a map in the Royal Archives that proved this. And he repeated the cavil that the devils are

immaterial spirits (though sometimes assuming bodies for the sake of appearance, but these bodies were likely no more than compressed air), and being immaterial spirits they could not be imprisoned by material gates or doors.

The Master Spy who was code-named Rex Romae or the King of Rome said that nothing we could do here in the Caliphate would have any effect on the coming and going of devils because the real and only Gates of Hell were located under the City of Rome several thousand miles to the West. He said that he himself had the only key to those gates of hell (he showed it to us; it was quite a small key), and he was under instructions to let one minor devil come out every year so that humans would not be entirely free from temptations and would not miss all the character-building that comes from resisting temptations. But he said that he was instructed to let no major devil out under any conditions.

The Master Spy Madam Jingo said that the dragons should be investigated on the suspicion of carrying contraband material of some sort. She said that the luminous globs that they belched up were full of creatures that flew away or walked off, and that these were probably devils.

And the Master Spies Cato of Camiroi, Adrian the Christian, Irene of Cos, Qabda the Fist, and the Golden Tom-Cat all had objections and belittlements.

The man who was possibly the oldest in the world (maybe the wisest also), the Magi Badadilma the Armenian, declared that he would have nothing to do with the Ovation-Triumph-Parade because it was too hasty (it should not have been staged until the Caliph had been in office for at least three days, and Al-Amin was not going to be in office for three days), because it was political in motivation and was neither ethical nor eschatological. This hurt because this Magi Badadilma had taken part in the Ovation-Parades of several previous Caliphs.

But it was still a glorious Ovation-Parade. And the new Caliph Al-Amin experienced an elevation of spirits when the horse-hoof-beats in his head were replaced by the sound of oars rowing tiredly against a current somewhere.

"My brother the Pretender has a short attention span," Al-Amin said. "He has forgotten that he was riding to Baghdad with murder in his heart, and he has gone rowing on some unidentified water on some other quest."

The Caliph Al-Amin was satisfied with this explanation that he had dreamed up, but I was not. Taking advantage of an interval when the parade was not moving (a deaf and stubborn donkey-driver had driven one hundred donkeys right athwart the route of the Ovation-Parade, trying to get to the Midsummer Donkey Fair, which was to be *tomorrow* and not today at all), and seeing a Bird-Master of my recent acquaintance in the crowd, I contracted with him to have three of his best Spy-Birds do a little job for me. And after I had instructed the birds briefly and quietly (you don't have to *shout* confidential matters at birds; creatures that can hear earth-worms breathing in the ground do not need to be shouted at), they flew off to fulfill their commissions.

Then the Ovation-Parade moved again, slowly but grandly. And now and then we members of the Royal Party spoke as we walked along, spoke of matters of prophecy and procedure and statecraft, and all the while we were showered with hundreds of thousands of roses and jasmines.

"Scheherazade," said the new Caliph Al-Amin, "no one can read the future except only God and the nine specialized angels to whom he has given the power to read specific parts of the future. But I have reason to believe that you *come from the future* by some grotesque accident. So things that are of the future to us may not be of the future to you. And as you are a damozel who notices things and remembers them and gathers facts as another girl would gather figs or dates, you may have knowledge of the one thing that I need to know. Can you tell me what year we will take the great city of Constantinople from the Christians?"

"Constantinople will fall to the Moslems in the year 1453 of the Christian Calendar, I believe," Scheherazade spoke with almost perfect certainty. "That would be the year 831 by the Moslem Calendar."

"But that's six hundred and forty years yet, Madam Scheherazade. If that is true, then the glory of taking the City will go to another and not to me. Are you sure of your years?"

"Pretty sure. Either Constantinople fell in 1453 and Columbus discovered America in 1493, or Constantinople fell in 1493 and Columbus discovered America in 1453. I'm pretty sure that the first case is the correct one, for Columbus had with him an old man who was a refugee from fallen Constantinople and who in his youth had sailed clear around the world in

the service of the City-Empire of Constantinople.”

“But, Madam Scheherazade,” Ali ben Raad, nee John Thunderson, protested. “Columbus discovered America in 1492. There is a mnemonic verse that children use to remember the date:

‘In fourteen hundred and ninety-two,
Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue.’ ”

Scheherazade went into peals of laughter (she had a pretty laugh) on hearing this gaffe of Thunderson, and we were all amused by it. “If there is any way to get a thing wrong, John Thunderson, you’ll get it wrong,” she chortled. “The correct mnemonic verse, of course, is:

‘In fourteen hundred and ninety-three,
Columbus sailed the deep blue sea.’

“I’m really amazed that you got it wrong by only one year. That’s the closest you’ve ever come to anything. No, Caliph Al-Amin, I am sorry, but you will not have the glory of conquering Constantinople. That glory will go to a Turk named Mohammed the Second, a grandson of the Caliph Bayazid of the Ottoman Turkish Caliphate.”

“What, a Caliph from that family of Turkish dogs! I know that low family of adventurers. I’d almost rather that the Christians would keep the City than that it should fall to a dog of that family of dogs. What will Allah have been thinking of when he permits the Ottoman Turks to become Moslems?”

One of the Spy-Birds I had sent out came back and spoke to me:

“Whatever Mamun the Great says when he arrives here will be a lie,” the bird said, “for the truth would be too damning to him. Mamun has gone to the ‘Door of Hell’ where you were recently, and he has received instructions from one of the Greater Devils imprisoned there, for Mamun is now of the party and allegiance of the Devils. But he’ll tell some wild story when he comes, to discredit his brother the Caliph Al-Amin.”

“My brother is of the party of the devils now, so your Spy-Bird says, Sindbad?” Al-Amin asked sadly (I was surprised that he had been able to hear the words). “This is a great sorrow to me. But now I hear him in my own head again, riding, riding, riding to come against us here in Baghdad.”

The second of the Spy-Birds came to me and reported:

“Do not believe the future Caliph Mamun the Great when he arrives here,” the bird said. “He has been getting his orders through a hole in the Iron Doors from the biggest devil of them all, the Devil Himself. Mamun will say something horrifying to discredit the present Caliph Al-Amin here, and he will succeed in discrediting him. Mamun the Great and the Biggest Devil were cackling in delight about some trick they were playing with the dragons. I didn’t quite catch what it was.”

“The dragons, those most tedious and most malodorous beasts on Earth!” Caliph Al-Amin cried in anguish. “They are too stupid to help anybody play a trick. Look at the oafs! They’re so full of something, probably swamp weeds, that I doubt whether they can fly at all now. I would declare open season on dragons except that they’re so foul when they’re dead: that’s probably what saves their lives. But I’d give a lot to clear them out of the Caliphate. We should drive them all to China or Franconia.”

We moved again in the wonderful Ovation-Triumph-Parade. But there were protesting pickets. They had their slogans written large on entire camel skins turned inside out and held high on forked poles:

“Up with Lady Narkos! Down with False Al-Amin the Toy Caliph!”

Lady Narkos was hashish. She was Poppycock or Opium. She was heroin. She was Methanane. She was Codeine. She was Angel Flesh. She was Mushroom Blood. She was Mirage and Illusion. There were even those who maintained that Holy Baghdad itself was one of her illusions, that it was only a Pipe Dream, that without Lady Narkos to spread her pleasant and colorful fuzziness over everything Baghdad would be seen as only a dismal collection of mud huts on the muddy river banks, and that all its vaunted artiness would be nothing except out-of-tune mumbles and jumbles and botch. Lady Narkos was the glorious

fuzziness of life, and she had strong partisans.

The third Spy-Bird came back to me:

"The thing that the future Caliph Mamun the Great and the High Devil along with the three biggest deputy devils were so gleeful about is that the dragons were being used to smuggle demons out of hell," the bird gave its report. "Sure the dragons swallowed the demons whole as they came out through the holes in the corroding iron. It doesn't hurt the demons to be swallowed. And the reputation that dragons have for being fire-breathers comes from them so often carrying fiery demons in their stomachs. Kill all the fat-stuffed dragons and open them up and spill the demons out of them! Don't let them take wing! Don't in any case let them get to the Spies' presently invisible space ships that are now riding at sky-anchor right above Holy Baghdad itself! The demons are using the dragons, and they intend to use the space ships to get out of hell and off-world and to infect all the other worlds."

"Kill them, spill them, break them open!" the Caliph Al-Amin howled. "Archers, knifemen, knout-men, bludgeon-men, catapult-men, kill the bloody dragons! And kill all the bloody vermin that comes out of their paunches!"

Oh, there was a great slaying of dragons then such as was a pleasure to see! And there was a great opening of them up. Fire poured out of them when they were split open, and sulfur and brimstone and red quicksilver. Quick devils hid in the fumes, and then broke clear and rushed every way to avoid the knives and knouts and bludgeons. Some of the devils rushed into human persons and possessed them, and threw them down, and caused them to speak in tongues, and foam at the mouths, and to prophecy falsely.

"Shall we kill the people who are indwelt by devils now?" a Captain of the knout-men asked.

"Nay, kill no human person," the Caliph cautioned. "Their bodies are temples even when defiled by demons. But we must get the devils out of them somehow. And some of the dragons have taken wing and are flying in spite of being so heavily laden. Where do they fly to? No, no, kill no human person!"

"Kill no devils either," the Boy-Caliph-Emeritus Harun al-Rashid bawled out incontinently. "They are all personal friends of mine. They are my Other People. I have a foot in each of the Three Worlds, in sublunar Earth, in the heavens, and in hell. And I will defend my devils forever."

"Oh, be quiet, my tedious father," the Caliph Al-Amin growled.

Then the mask of the boy-father Harun, the mask of the appearance of his own face two days ago, fell off and revealed the present face of the foul-starred Harun al-Rashid. It was horrifying, fetid, evil, hellish, laughing, haunted. And now the magnetic aura of the Harun was reversed. No more did it bring delight to all who were intersected by its field. Now it brought revulsion, fear of falling, fear of fire, fear of damnation, the sensation of strangling and drowning, the sensation of being buried alive, despondency, loathing, agony of dying, all things sordid and dismal and waylaid and lost.

But the end of the Harun was not yet. That was only a strong premonition of it. He rallied. He assumed a new mask. He projected a new aura. For a while he regained some of the influence he had lost.

"Loyal Eagles, Loyal Kites, Loyal Roc if you can hear me and come here soon enough, all of you, assail the flying dragons!" Caliph Al-Amin cried out. "People, fill the royal balloons with royal gas and ascend to the flying dragons. Oh, oh, oh, they are already at the space ships of the careless Spies! They are at the ships that are riding invisible at sky-anchor just above us. And now the ships lose their invisibility, and the demons pour into them from the disgorging dragons. Shoot them down! Fill the sky with arrows and javelins!"

But the space ships of Master Spy Citizen Heifritz, of the Master Spies Alexander of Astrobe, Cato of Camiroi, Madam Jingo, and the Golden Tom-Cat were all filling with devils. And then those Plague Ships, as they had become, vanished with whoosh and flame, each on the skyway to its own world to bring infectious devils there.

"Oh, what have I done, what have I done!" the Caliph Al-Amin moaned. "Our own plague-world will now spread its plague to the other four of the Five Worlds; and very soon all seventeen worlds, and then all ten thousand worlds, all will fall to the plague. The plague of devils will eat up all the skies. What will we do?"

There was a sudden great permutation of the weather. An icy death-wind blew out of the hot desert. It was like a freezing horror that congealed the mind and the spirit and the body. But

it was only one man arriving. And he had been expected.

Mamun the Great, the brother of the Caliph Al-Amin, burst onto the scene on a lathered racing horse that fell dead as the pretender Caliph Mamun jumped clear of it. But the horse did not fall dead passively. It bounded end over end. It rolled like a hoop. It skidded, and it left a long and bloody swathe on the stones after it was dead. It was one of those pumpkin-colored Arabian horses that cannot even die without making a great show about it.

It was the thirteenth horse that Mamun the Great had ridden to death on his wild ride from the regional capital of Merv in Central Asia to Baghdad in the Two-Rivers Country. Mamun the Great was himself bleeding from mouth, nose, ears, and eyes, and he had the broken end of a jagged ulna bone protruding from the flesh of his right forearm. But he was laughing with red-and-black joy, and he cracked his broken voice at his brother and at the multitudes like a caravan-master's whip.

"What will you do, my craven brother, you ask? You will stand aside and make room for a Caliph who is man enough to command both men and devils, man enough to command the ocean and land and fire and air and further air. Good Moslem people, and the sprinkling of visiting Christians among you, know that this false Caliph gave a commission to a false Sindbad to take ship and find passage under the Earth, and to prevent traitors from opening the iron doors of hell that are under the Earth, and to verify that those iron doors remain safely closed against the powers of evil. But to False Sindbad privately he gave a different instruction. And when I came to the place, good people, rowing a small boat alone, the Gates of Hell stood wide open, and the devils were pouring out of them by the thousands. Oh, the wretchedness, Oh the rottenness of this my brother the False Caliph who gave a false order secretly! Oh the wretchedness and the rottenness of the False Sindbad who fulfilled the false order! Well, I will put them both to death, of course, and I will undo the evil they have done inasmuch as I am able to do so. I will send ships after the Sky Ships of the False Spies in which the devils have escaped. And I will hunt down and extirpate such of the devils as are still on the surface of this world. Support me, people, and I will save you from this catastrophe!"

"He lies, of course," the third Spy-Bird spoke to me. "But you had better make your escape to some other place, Sindbad, when the duel and the eclipse are both going on."

"Speak, quaking brother of mine," the Pretender Caliph Mamun the Great continued to attack his brother Caliph Al-Amin with his mouth. "Will you step down immediately from your office of Caliph? Or must I kill you? I dislike to kill you, for you are my brother and I will have the Mark of Cain on me if I do kill you. And yet I've noticed that the fratricides who have the Mark of Cain on them seem to lead charmed lives and are pretty much immune to assassination themselves. I myself intend to live a charmed life from now on. And if it will vantage me to kill you, then you can consider yourself as already dead. Stand at attention, craven brother, while I speak to you and question you! And let your answers be no more than 'yes, yes' or 'no, no', for anything beyond that is from the evil one. And let your eyes be cast down."

"Be quiet, lesser person," the Caliph Al-Amin rejoined. "I am the Caliph, and I will ask the questions. And you will answer straight and without duplicity. You are a pretender, and you seem to be issuing a challenge. Will you fight me now for the Caliphate? Or do you wish to wait until the broken bone in your forearm has healed?"

"Yes to the first question. No to the second," Mamun the Great replied in a grinding voice as if it had sand in it. "I'll execute you now, of course. Should it take two arms to kill half a man? But as to my broken forearm, do you not know that I have a hundred powerful friends any one of whom can heal it in an instant? But that the people may see and believe —"

The Pretender Caliph Mamun the Great held his right arm extended in front of him. A stranger emerged from the crowd (but he was not such a person as could be lost in a crowd) came and touched the broken forearm of Mamun. And the splintered, broken bone went back into the flesh by itself: and the forearm glowed with dark strength. Little flames then ran along that healed forearm as a portent. And then something that had always been invisible about Mamun became visible: it was seen that little flames ran along *all* the flesh of Mamun the Great, a sign that he trafficked with illicit flames.

"This son of mine who has been selected by the flames shall be called my true son," the boy-father Harun al-Rashid proclaimed. "Let Mamun the Great be called my only son. Let the weak Al-Amin collapse with fear, for he is henceforth no son of mine."

"Oh, be quiet, my tedious father," the Caliph Al-Amin growled. "All right, my brother

Mamun, consult with the devils your seconds and decide what weapons you want to use. And I also will consult."

The Caliph Al-Amin selected Dame Scheherazade and myself Essindibad Copperbottom the Master Mariner and Master Spy to be his seconds, we being the two persons standing nearest to him at that moment. So we consulted together.

"I am not in love with the weapons of this era," Scheherazade complained, "and I have not been able to improve them with all my efforts. The rapier of the High French dueling days is not known here, nor is the saber of the Heidelberg students. And, lacking those two weapons, everything else about Arabic dueling of this century must be third class.

"Ah, if only we could stage a D'Artagnan-type duel with the rapiers whispering silently on each other as the duelers fought their way up and down flowing staircases, jumped onto and from balconies, swung on chandeliers! And yes, the duelers should wear cavalier-style hats with very long feathers plumed from them, and be clad in brightly-colored silken doublets and cordovan-leather boots and Amsterdam gauntlets. Ah, and again, Ah! And a long 'If Only!'"

"I am sure that all of your props can somehow be provided, Madam Scheherazade," the Caliph Al-Amin said. "We will propose it anyhow."

"I am an almost-magic blacksmith," said a dirty-faced man who stepped out of the crowd. "And my shop is right around the corner on Blacksmith Street, I can make and adapt knives almost instantly, if Madam Scheherazade will provide me with a quick sketch."

Scheherazade drew a quick sketch on a piece of wood, and the blacksmith took it and went to make a matched set of D'Artagnan-type French rapiers.

"I am a costumer," said another man who stepped out of the crowd, "and my shop is right around the corner of Costumer Street. If Madam Scheherazade will provide me with a quick sketch of the costumes she wishes, I can either provide them out of stock, or I can rip up and combine several costumes and effects to get the proper results."

Scheherazade drew a quick sketch on another piece of wood for the costumes she had in mind, and she gave it to the costumer.

Then a man who made great flowing stairways, another man who made hanging chandeliers such as one might swing on, another man who made balconies that had a theatrical look to them, another man who made cavalier-style hats with long-drooping feathers, another man who made boots out of mock-Cordovan leather (real Cordovan leather had not yet appeared on this world), they all offered their services for almost instant provision, and they all delivered on their promises.

Oh, that great flowing staircase that gushed like waterfalls out of six different palaces and took up an entire broad street after all its tributaries had flowed into it! Oh that fantastic chandelier on which a man or elephant might swing! It was hung from a very tall gibbet that was rolled there on rollers. This gibbet had been specially built twenty years before this for hanging a giant. Many City-Planners have never given thought to just how high a gibbet must be to hang a genuine full-grown giant of the family of Anak. The special gibbet had been kept as a warning to any future giant who might be tempted to take liberties with Holy Baghdad.

Surprisingly, Mamun the Great went along cheerfully with all the gimmicks devised by Scheherazade.

"It will be an execution with class," he said. "I am afraid that I usually do them crudely and with no style at all, but I'm willing to learn." He put on a feathered Cavalier-style hat and a brightly colored silk doublet, the mock-Cordovan boots, Amsterdam gauntlets, and the arty weapons-sash. He sighted down the rapier. "A toy," he said, "a toy. But then the brother I shall kill with it is only a toy. I am ready any time."

"Why am I afraid of him?" the Caliph Al-Amin asked us his seconds. "Why do I think that Mamun is larger and stronger than I am when I am plainly larger and stronger than he is? Why do I believe that he is a cannier weapon-wielder than I am, when I know for a fact that I am much better at every weapon than he is? In the clear light of day I know that I can kill him. Ah, but I have a horror of fighting him in the dark! I fear that he'll have all the powers of darkness on his side."

"You'd better hurry then," I said. "The eclipse will be total. Yes, in just nineteen minutes it will be total."

"Maybe they're wrong about the eclipse," Al-Amin hazarded. "But I had better start the fight if there must be one. Craven brother of mine, Mamun the Great, come join the fight against me at once."

"Craven brother of mine, Al-Amin the Non-Great, come join the fight against me at once," Mamun the Great called out.

So they clashed and fought.

And the fearful Al-Amin was a much better fencer than was the vaunting Mamun the Great. Al-Amin parried and struck, and he drew first blood. He parried and struck again, and he drew second blood. He drove Mamun the Great up the elegant sweeping staircase; and Mamun at least showed style in the stairway encounter, but not much real defense. Al-Amin parried and struck twice more, and he drew third and fourth blood. And Mamun was death-pale, but still vaunting.

"Why are you the one who is fearful, craven brother?" Mamun taunted. "It is plainly I who am bleeding to death. But you will fear me more when I am dead than you fear me alive. Learn to fear me both ways, craven! Strike, strike, strike! But it will not avail you. I know something which you do not know."

Al-Amin struck and struck and struck again. And Mamun the Great fell and then rolled some way down the flowing stairs. A Physician came and pronounced him dead. "The duel should be over," said the Physician.

"But the duel is *not* over," one of Mamun's seconds insisted. "If a man rises from the dead within a reasonable period of time, he is allowed to continue the duel. That was always the case in the old days when they had duels that were duels."

This Second of Mamun did not have the full human appearance. Likely he belonged to one of the powers-of-darkness species. He leaned over Mamun. He did queer things to him with his hands. The blood disappeared from Mamun and from his garments. The death-pallor went away from him. The color of health returned to Mamun the Great. He rose to his feet.

"Craven brother of mine," the risen Mamun taunted, "I said that I knew a thing which you didn't know. I know several such things. You are looking at the sun with a little apprehension, craven brother of mine. Yes, the shadow of the moon is already beginning to cover it. You may kill me once more. You may kill me twice more. And then will come the dark, and people will say of me 'This is his time, and the Hour of Darkness'. When we are in the dark of the full eclipse, then I will kill you. Do you have Seconds who can raise you from the dead, Al-Amin? Even Scheherazade can do it only in a fiction form. Why did you not have the foresight to arrange such things as I have arranged for myself. You knew I was coming. You suffered the beat of my horses' hooves in your head. Why are you not repaired?"

They fought again, and Al-Amin had much the better of the fight. He drove Mamun up the stairway again, and Mamun showed less style and even a touch of fear. He wounded Mamun quicker and deeper and more often than he had done on the first encounter. The rapier is not really a hacker, but Al-Amin used it as such, or as a flexible cutting whip. He hacked off both the hands of Mamun the Great at the wrists. He nearly hacked his head off, but I Essindibad the Second at the duel stopped him.

"Holy, Caliph Al-Amin," I interposed. "I, one of your Seconds, stop you now. One may not hack a man after he is dead. That is against the whole spirit of the thing."

"I'm sorry, and I regret it," the Caliph Al-Amin said, and he stepped back. "But with Mamun, how can one be sure that he's dead?"

"He is dead," the Physician said, "and the duel should be over. But the rule from the old days seems to prevail, that if a man rises from the dead within a reasonable period of time he may continue the duel."

A different Second of Mamun now bent over him. This creature, masked and cloaked as he was, was still plainly other than human, and more of the dark brotherhood even than the previous Second had been. He did things to Mamun with his hands. He attached Mamun's hands back to his wrists, put Mamun's head back on more securely, for it had been almost severed. He fixed Mamun's broken neck and much else about him. He put blood into Mamun with an instrument. He gave a dripping and unsavory (so it seemed to me) morsel to Mamun who swallowed it, but with great difficulty. And he waited. The surgeon came.

"This man is still dead," the surgeon said, "but he is not as dead as he was a short time ago. How much time is a reasonable time for a man to rise from the dead and continue the duel?"

"A little bit longer, only a little bit longer," the Second of Mamun croaked like the croaking of a Stygian frog. This Second then did other things to Mamun the Great. The blood did not disappear either from his person or from his garments as it had done the first time. But the pallor of death did disappear from him, and the flush of life returned. Mamun the

Great rose to his feet.

"I will acknowledge, craven brother, that the second death which you have just dealt to me did not leave me scatheless," Mamun spoke with a difficult voice. "Every time a man dies, even if most briefly, it takes a little something out of him. But I see the first star in the sky. It is my luck star, craven brother, and not yours. It is always lucky to see the first star in the noon sky before your opponent sees it. I cry '*haz*' luck, and I cry '*nagm*' star, and I cry '*waqt*' time. Do you not recall the childrens's game when we could call on our luck and our star to gain critical time in our battles? It was the lucky star respite to be used when one was hard pressed. I often used it against you, but you were never alert enough to use it against me. I will take a little 'lucky star respite' now, a reasonable time before we resume the fight."

"No, no," the Caliph Al-Amin protested. "The noon-light begins to fail. Let us fight when we have clear light to fight by. The darkness will confuse the fight and let other factors enter in."

"Bless those other factors," Mamun the Great spoke with a bit more strength in his voice. "In the 'Land of Other Factors' I am Caliph and you are not. Thirteen stars I am able to count in-the sky now, and thirteen is my lucky number. But I see the black cloud coming! You will not have even star-light to see by, craven brother who's afraid of the dark! The eclipse comes apace, and so do the clouds. We have fought twice in the daylight you trust. In a while we will fight my kind of fight in the dark."

"Fight now, coward, fight now!" Al-Amin cried, and he approached his brother thrusting with his weapon. "Fight *now*!"

"Almost now, frightened brother, almost now. Notice how much more nimble I am in the quarter light? Notice how I am faster of hand and foot than you are in the one-eighth light! Ah, you stumble, Al-Amin. You stumble in both foot and brain. And the one-sixteenth light shows panic in your face. Savor the acrid taste of this last quarter minute of your life, Al-Amin. And now that there is nobody here able to raise *you* from the dead, except only God, and he does not ordinarily interfere in duels."

The darkness became total. And the rapiers began to scrape with silvery and uncertain sound on each other.

'Death has very poor eyesight when he comes by daylight, and especially when the sun is bright. He will grope with his blinded hands, and often he will not be able to find his victim at all. He more easily finds his victim on cloudy days than on sunny days, and in the early morning or late evening than in the bright noontime. He more easily finds his victims on the shady than the sunny side of the street. But when he comes after dusk, and especially when he comes in full darkness at whatever the hour, he will find his victim and will not go away empty.'

—*Legends of the Persian Gulf*. Moisha El-Gazma.

Oh Green His Shoes And Wig And Death

There had been a scream out of the total darkness, and it had been in the ragged voice of Mamun the Great. There had been a second such scream from him, and then a more vigorous clatter of the blades.

And then there had been a low but carrying moan in a timbre that wasn't Mamun's. Then a fall. We all knew that we had all heard the death-moan of Al-Amin.

There was silence over the entire city of Baghdad then, for thirteen seconds, in which time one lone cricket chirped thirteen times. And then came the tired and ragged and bloody (one knew that it was bloody) voice of the Pretender Caliph (now the real Caliph) Mamun the Great:

"Be quiet, cricket. I will chirp my own chirps. I also am Caliph of crickets. Open your eyes, God. I knew that there was no cloud passing over the sun. I knew that it was only yourself closing your eyes to make the eclipse of your sun more complete. Open your eyes now! What was done was done in the dark. And it were better so. None, not even yourself, will ever know whether it was honest execution or whether it was black murder. I see the stars now, so you have opened your eyes again. Now, in just a moment, the sun will dawn at noon, its second dawn today. And when it dawns will it reveal that you have given me a token so that no one finding me shall kill me?

"I hadn't originally intended to kill my brother. I wasn't riding to Baghdad with murder in my heart. I was riding with very mixed emotions in my heart. And I rode alone, until early this morning, after my brother had sent seven different patrols to kill me. One does not ride alone against a hundred thousand men in garrison if he has murder in his heart. My brother Al-Amin had made a straw monster out of me to justify certain whims of his own. But after I had cut my way out of seven different encirclements of his horsemen, I began to feel less kindly to him. It wasn't that I hated my brother. It was just that there was room for only one of us in the Caliphate. You can understand this, surely, since there is room for only one of you in the Universe. You may know that there are shady stories about yourself on this very subject.

"It is written in one of the books, though not in one presently reckoned as holy, that you God had a twin and that you slew him before time began. That business 'before time began' is as convenient as yourself closing your eyes to pull darkness over an inconvenient happening.

"No, I cannot prove the fratricide charge against you, God, but can you prove it against me? When it is light enough for you to see again, you will notice the way that my brother has fallen and that he has been killed by his own thin Frankish blade in falling. Do not look too close at the haft of that blade, for we used a matched set of weapons. One of them had the letter A (Alif) on the haft of it for Al-Amin. And the other one had the letter M (Mim) on it for Mamun the Great. I say that my brother was killed by his own blade; and if you do not look too closely at the letter on the blade, I will not look too closely at some of your own doings."

A slice of fire was in the sky now as the eclipse slipped off the sun. By the light of that second dawn of the day there was seen Mamun the Great striding on the elegant sweep of the steps like one drunken. And the body of his brother Al-Amin was seen lying a few steps above him, on its belly, and with a rapier protruding from his back. As to which letter was on the haft of that rapier, it would never be known. The haft itself was buried very deep in the belly of the dead Al-Amin, and only the pommel could be seen beneath him. As to the other rapier that Mamun the Great still held in his hand, well he would be holding it in his hand for the rest of his life. And no one would ever see what letter was on its haft. For Mamun held the weapon in an odd manner with his thumb covering that part of the haft where the subscript is commonly written.

The blood-covered Mamun spoke again in his blood-slippiery and ragged voice: "I do not hold my thumb over it for fear of what men should see (What have I to fear from men?) but for fear of what God should see. So far, God can only guess what happened in the dark. He cannot *know* that it is my blade that is driven into my brother's belly, and that this is my brother's fallen blade that I hold in my hand. He suspects this, but he cannot know it for true. My Seconds, I am in pain. See what you can do for my bloody eye and my bloody throat, though I suspect that you can do nothing for either."

The unhuman Seconds came and put their hands on the wound high on Mamun's throat. They cleared away the blood, but they did not clear away the red from that wound. The Mark was there, starkly and garishly.

"It is the Mark of Cain," several people cried.

"No, it is the Mark of Mamun the Great," Mamun contradicted them, "and yet it is the same mark. I never knew why it was believed that the Mark of Cain was on the brow. It was on the throat. Cain went always wrapped with a heavy scarf about his throat, but it was a scarf that hid nothing. The Mark of Cain came through on every scarf that he ever wore, as starkly and garishly as it was on his throat itself. There are nine of these 'Cain Scarves' in museums around the world (one of them here in Holy Baghdad), nine of them existing to this very day. But only the Illuminati know what they are. So I will also go always with a scarf wrapped around my own throat, and the mark will come through every swathing that I wear. Give me that scarf that you carry, rich person! Is it not finely done with the threads of real gold! See, see, the Token, the Mark of Mamun, comes through from my throat to the scarf. And yet no person will ever see my bare throat again.

"Now, my eye, my eye! See to it, Seconds and Unhuman Healers! See what can be done about my eye!"

The unhuman Seconds and Doctors did things with their hands in the region where Mamun's left eye had been. But the eye was gone forever, and only an empty horror was in its place. There was no healing possible there.

"So I will wear black for my dead brother every day of my life," Mamun said. "Bring me a black eye-patch. Ah yes, does it not give me a rakish appearance! Now bring a dog-cart and the two giant mastiff dogs from Anglia. Now I am a pirate and the father of pirates."

"I want to ride on the dog-cart with the body of my eldest and least worthy son," Harun al-Rashid chimed in. "I think I can use the body in some practical jokes tonight. There are any number of things that one may do with a dead body, and all of them are funny. Let me ride in the cart with the body, Mamun. We'll give it to the dogs to eat tomorrow, but tonight I want to have fun with it."

"You'll ride on the dog-cart in your clown suit, with your green wig and your green, turned-up shoes. You'll ride with Al-Amin's body on the dog-cart, my unrespected father, but you shall not play any tricks with it. You will ride in the Ovation-Parade with my brother's body in the dog-cart until the parade is over with. You'll ride in your green motley till you come to your own green death.

"But I will take over the Ovation-Parade now. There is no reason to waste a good Triumph-Accolade-Ovation-Parade. And when it is over with, the dogs will let you know by their bristling against you that it is time for you to leave the cart. This strain of mastiff dogs was introduced here from the foggy Island of Anglia in the time of my grandfather. They are not quite the most giant breed of dogs in the world, though they are sufficiently giant-like. They have a stronger sense of ritual than have any other dogs.

"My brother Al-Amin shall still be a Caliph. Now he shall be a Caliph of Dogs. The dogs of the several breeds, but led by the Mastiffs, have had human Caliphs for more than thirty years now. Dead-Man Caliphs, but they can walk and talk, or shuffle and stammer. The dogs are satisfied to be ruled by a human man even if he is a dead man. I think they prefer it to be this weird way. But they'll not eat the body. They'll keep it, and it will walk for them thrice a month. And not even God will be able to get a look at the initial that is on the haft of the rapier that transfixes my brother. The dogs would not let even God come close enough to see it.

"Trumpet-blowers, bugle-blowers, ram's-horn-blowers, unicorn-horn-blowers, blow now a rousing blast for me and my Ovation! Ah yes, '*The One-Eyed Man is King Today*', I love that tune. It is a comic tune, but it will serve for my ovation.

"Sindbad, walk beside me. I've decided not to have you killed, but I have a bit of scorn to pour upon your head.

"Scheherazade, you'll be my wife tonight. I don't know what arrangement you had with my father or with my brother, but I will have you by my own arrangement. What tales you scribble now will be for my high praise."

"I have a husband already, in an unconsummated way," she said. "I am not convinced that he's entirely dead. I am not convinced that he's entirely dead. If he will walk for the Mastiffs thrice a month, then I will walk with them also. Considering my clammy experience as one of the thousand-and-one wives of the Father Harun al-Rashid, being married to a living-dead zombie-man will be almost prosaic."

"Follow the dogs and the body then, Damzel. And come to me when you have finished your traffic with my dead brother. I believe that you will not follow him long. What is the real reason for your whimsy? Nobody could ever be taken with a passion for my brother in the less than a day he had been Caliph. Is this one of your fictions, girl? What hooked you?"

I had the clear impression that Mamun the Great was a larger and taller man than his dead brother Al-Amin had been. And yet I had stood beside both of them, and Al-Amin had surely been taller by a head. And I had the impression that the bloody murderer Mamun was a kind man.

"I am not sure where my fictions leave off and my facts begin, Caliph," Scheherazade said, "but what hooked me was the dog-cart. It could only have been drawn by Dore, and it couldn't have been made at all. In the world of Dore there were no round wheels. And then I am convinced that these dogs are inhabited by the souls of ghuls, and this fascinates me."

"Sindbad, you are in a bad case," Mamun the Great spoke to me. "I heard myself plainly tell the people that I would put you to death. And I heard your third Spy-Bird tell you to escape to some other place while the duel and the eclipse were both going on. Why didn't you?"

"Like Scheherazade, I cannot turn down a good story or a promising adventure. Maybe I wanted to see how I'm going to get out of this one. There's a story in you somewhere, Mamun."

"And I have a question for you, Mamun," Scheherazade chirped. "Why did you kill your brother? Why did you ride here so murderously so that he would have no choice but to kill or be killed? You aren't a devil."

"I'm not. Al-Amin may have been. He was the son of the boy-devil Harun al-Rashid. I'm not, though it is commonly believed that I am. As to Al-Amin and myself being brothers, we were brothers who had both different mothers and different fathers. The seed of Harun could be a disaster. I believe that I will stop right here, on the top of this hillock, and make a speech to the people:

"People of Baghdad, I have been maligned in rumor and reputation as a bad and bloody man," Mamun the Great orated in his rough voice. "I look like a bloody man now, but it is my own blood on me. I am really a kind and compassionate person, humble, the servant of the servants, full of quiet dedication and devotion. I am the very opposite of what is usually said of me. What, what, what? Why are you laughing and jeering, people? Have a care. If you kindle my wrath with your jeering, I'll give you a new demonstration of the meaning of the word 'fearful'. Oh, I see what it is! It does give an ironic twist to my words, I'll admit."

The ironic thing was a gallop of three hundred of the horsemen of Mamun the Great riding and each carrying a freshly-severed human head on the end of a long lance.

"You know, of course," Mamun explained to the crowds, "that this is the custom whenever a new man rises to the Caliphate. My brother Al-Amin had three hundred horsemen riding yesterday, each with a newly-hacked human head on the end of a lance, and nobody gave it a thought. But when I use the same ancient custom (or rather, when it is used in my name, for I had forgotten about it completely), then there are those among you who would hold it against me. Perhaps I will declare the custom abolished, and yet each new Caliph should have his choice in such things. I assure you there will be no new Caliph while I live, not any duplication of this ancient custom."

"My brother Al-Amin set up a number of projects and issued a number of edicts yesterday and into the night. Many of them were good, and some of them were silly; and I will go along with all the good ones and reject all the silly ones. Yes, we will go ahead with the dredging of the canals and the draining of the swamps, and with expanding the irrigation of all the Two-Rivers area. We will go ahead with the Dromedary Express for the rapid carrying of mail and small packages from one end of the Caliphate to the other. We will continue to foster navigation from Holy Baghdad all the way to the Arabian Gulf and into the great Ocean itself.

We will keep the new 'Reanimated Department of Fisheries' to foster better table fish from both the rivers and oceans and to restrict the depredations of alligators. But under this department we will also foster turtles and protect their eggs. We will go ahead with the 'Reanimated Departments of Armaments' to proceed with the casting of the big brass cannon for battering down the walls of Constantinople. What, what? Does somebody say that the Damsel Scheherazade told my brother that Constantinople will not fall to the Muslims for another six hundred and forty years? I didn't know about that. I will examine the lass privately, perhaps under torture, on this matter. In any case we will go ahead with the big brass cannon. We can always use it to batter some walls down somewhere. But I will not bring Mandarin-Orange trees from China. I have eaten Mandarin-Oranges on our own Central Asian frontier, and they are inferior to our own pomegranates.

"But as to freeing the slaves, I say let us not be too hasty with that. Well, this is the first day of freeing the slaves, and all who have slaves have freed one of them today. And all who have two or more slaves must free another one tomorrow and another one the day after tomorrow according to the edict of my brother Al-Amin. But this must not be. Only every seventh day may be a slave-freeing day. And on the seventh day, only as many slaves may be freed as those previously freed slaves who request a return to bondage. A slave can get very hungry in the seven days after he is freed. This will give a steady number of persons who want to be freed balanced by persons requesting a return to servitude and food. And it will give a sort of circulation in the body politic. And some persons will remain free and will do well.

"My brother had unfriendly words to speak against Lady Narkos, as he calls her. My brother was an unsuccessful poet, and for any Arab to be an unsuccessful poet is a very un-Arabic thing to be. I myself have neither bad nor good words for the Narkos Wench, but only ambiguous words. We need her, we need her for perhaps a thousand years yet. But it will be a happy day when we need her no longer.

"Without Wench Narkos and her opium poppycock, her hashish, her heroin, we would not see the world that we do see. We would see a much meaner world, an intolerable world. 'By the Stones of Baghdad' people sometimes swear, as they swore 'By the Stones of Babylon' an older city on the same site. But there are no stones in Baghdad, and there were none in Babylon. There is river mud here. There are a few mud bricks, poorly baked, and there is wattle of weeds and twigs. Of such things is this great city built, out of mud; and we are not able to rise above the mud. This day I come to palace after palace, all mine as Caliph, and they are nothing except over-sized mud hovels.

"Without Wench Narkos there is nothing grand here, hardly anything tolerable. The Living Water of our Fountains is mixed muddy river water and sewage, and the fountains are of ancient broken ceramic which we no longer know how to manufacture. Our roads are of desert sand and pebbles which we have brought in to cover the mud, and they sink down into the mud every day. Our arts and our songs are spun out of mud fingers and mud mouths. Our loyalties are no stronger than the mud of which they are made. So we must practice illusion, and Wench Narkos has a readiness in illusion. This is the Baghdad Mirage, Magic Baghdad. I had not been in this City for many years until today, preferring the hard country of the frontier, the rocky deserts where the ground at least solid.

"My purported father, the Boy-Caliph Emeritus Harun al-Rashid, he there in green clown motley riding with the body of his dead son on a lop-wheeled cart pulled by giant dogs who are indwelt by the souls of ghuls, He the Harun is a master of illusion. He is good at that, and at nothing else. He was the main creator of the Baghdad Mirage in its present form. Baghdad where the streets are paved with gold! Or perhaps with mica or fools'-gold. Baghdad where all the gold is really inferior brass, and all the brass is gray pot-metal. But all of the Great Cities have been mirages.

"Rome remains, in memory at least, a 'Hard Mirage'. It was very often convincing, until prophetic eyes allowed some persons to see through the mirage to the reality. But in Rome they were able to create non-narcotic mirages, of men rather than of stones. Livy, and after him Plutarch, were men of the world and both of them created the illusion and mirage of 'Great Men'. I never cease to admire that illusion. But both Livy and Plutarch knew that there were really no great men anywhere. It is true, however, that un-great men sometimes have genuine great moments in their lives. I pray that I may have several such great moments also.

"Constantinople inherits something of this quality of the 'Hard Mirage', which is why we so desire it and lust for it. A more solid and sustained dream is better than one that will cover

you hardly at all.

"But how will we build a life-reality and a civil-reality under cover of such mirages as we can manage? This I do not know, but as Caliph it is my business to find it out and to effect it. Why am I not now avid to find and destroy the escaped devils, as I seemed to be so avid earlier in the hour? — so one of you asks. Oh, that was parable. We ourselves are the dragons, and our bellies are full of devils. I am still avid to root out those devils, but it is quite difficult.

"Thank you all. My next speech will be at the high place named Caravansary Corner which I will reach in my place in the Ovation-Parade (Oh, mirage of mirages, the Ovation-Parade!) in about thirteen minutes."

"You are not 'bad show' yourself, Mamun," Scheherazade said. "It's true that you are repulsive almost beyond bearing, but total repulsiveness was ever 'good show'. If only they had 'acting' now!"

"We do have 'acting' now. And we have little else."

"The year I lived in Chicago," Scheherazade rattled and jingled in her musical voice, "I went to the 'Old Time Classical Monster Movie House' four times a week. My favorite 'Monster Actor' was always Lon Chaney. He could play any monster ever. But Mamun, *you* could have played *him*. You could have played Lon Chaney. You could have been the '*Monsters' Monster*'."

"I'm that good, am I, Scher?"

"Oh yes. You're perfect. You had a lot going for you already. But now, that livid 'Mark of Cain' at your throat that comes through one of a dozen scarves so shockingly, there's genius in that. And your eye that's been destroyed! There is something about a black eye-patch that really gets me. I wore one myself for six weeks once, the year I lived in Albuquerque, and I was amazed at how fulfilled I felt. And those little dark flames that run along your flesh at even the best times, they're both 'good hell' and 'good theatre'."

"I knew an old Khan in Central Asia who wore an eye-patch over each eye," Mamun spoke in his ragged voice. "He wore a red patch over his left eye and a black patch over his right eye. He said that he'd always had trouble remembering which was his left hand and which was his right; but with the patches he never went wrong. The red patch was for his port side. The old Khan got around quite well considering that both of his regular eyes had been blinded. But he said that he had already seen everything anyhow. He read the Koran out loud for two hours every day. He cheated though. He'd memorized it. He'd done that, pardon me, Schertz, the year he lived in Kabul. And to silence those who said that he got around so well because he had another seeing-and-sensing center, he wore a third eye-patch, an orange-colored one, on the top of his head in the traditional location of the 'third eye'. His wife said that not only had he always had trouble telling is left from his right, but he'd always had real trouble in telling top from bottom and up from down. But the orange-colored patch over the third eye on the top of his cured him of that. He knew that oranges grew in the tops of trees."

"We may have to change places, and thou'lt be the story-teller and I will be the Caliph," Scheherazade said.

"I doubt me not that I could be a good story-teller," the Monsters' Monster Mamun the Great rasped in his ragged voice. "I was always a good camp-fire story-teller, especially on the night before and the night after a battle. I doubt me only that Thyself would be sufficient as Caliph. We will not change places today. Tomorrow perhaps we will, Scheherazade.

"But this is the place where the dogs turn off. I myself will continue on my Ovation-Parade. And then I will throw a bash around the water-clock, in my main palace, and it will overflow into thirteen other palaces. People, I can really throw a bash. Come with me all who love a high time. And let those who prefer it go to the dogs."

I, Essindibad Copperbottom, went with Mamun the Great, of course, as did my wife the Grand Dame, and most of my new friends. But that yawkish kid, the False Sindbad, John Thunderson went to the dogs along with his mechanical wife Blue Moon. And, strangely enough, the damsel Scheherazade went with them also. I here insert some of the ramblings of the kid Thunderson, because there is a certain interest in the dog episode, and it contains the death of Harun al-Rashid. Here it is in Thunderson's wobble-tongued words:

Thunderson here. And my wife Blue Moon. And Damsel Scheherazade.

We went down Dog Alley and through the Dog Gate. Somebody gave dog masks to

Myself, to Blue Moon, to Scheherazade, and to the ever-boy, ever-Caliph Harun al-Rashid. The dog mask of Harun was green. We would never have been allowed down Dog Alley or through the Dog Gate without the dog masks.

Outside the Dog Gate is a whole dog landscape. Humans who do not go out the Dog Gate can never see this, for there is no other way on earth into this region. None of the Famous Travelers has ever been here. It is Dog Country. It is not Human Country.

It had been misty and drizzly down Dog Lane. In truth the more ancient and more accurate name for the little roadway was 'Wet Dog Lane'. And in Dog Country itself it was not always damp, but it was also colorless. It was a black and white and gray world. This is the only sort of world that dogs can see anyhow, and there was no sense in providing colors for the very few colorvision creatures who would come there.

Oh, Oh, Oh, they did not love the Boy-Caliph Harun al-Rashid in Dog Country. But the most livid hatred against him seemed to be mounted by the dogs who were not really dogs.

"You False-Caliph, you Joker-Caliph!" one of the dogs cried angrily at him in a human voice. "A practical joke that doesn't have an end isn't funny. It is an open horror, a crawling eternity of sick giggles. You changed myself and many others into dogs for the amusement of your raffish friends. But you didn't change us back again when the joke should have been over. Change us back now, or we will kill you and gnaw your bones."

"You must never gnaw my bones, for the bones of one who has been Caliph are holy," Harun stated with cracked dignity. He still wore his green shoes with the turned-up toes. He still wore his suit of green clown motley. He wore his green-fuzz dog mask, and his green wig was atop that. "You are wrong to say that a practical joke that doesn't end isn't funny," he spoke in his Bozo-the-Clown voice. "The joke on your dog faces is the funniest ever. I often wake up laughing at it. I hear your shrill voices 'We are not really dogs! We are citizens of Baghdad! We are prisoned in dog bodies by the Boy-Caliph and forgotten by him. Get a magician! Get an old spell-woman! Get us out of here!' But I will tell you something, slobbering dogs. The spell that I had put on you is a permanent spell. It cannot be rescinded. You can seek any remedy you wish, but it will not work. You will still be dogs forever and aye. You don't think that is funny? It seems to me it's one of the funniest practical jokes I ever pulled. It belongs to the let-me-out-of-here sort of jokes that can go on forever."

There was indeed a throne for a Dog Caliph there, and a curious figure already sat on that throne. It was but a skeleton with only scanty remnants of leathery flesh left on it. It had been a black man, and it still wore manacles on its bone-wrists and links of chain dangling from them.

"He was the leader of a slave revolt," one of the dogs told us conversationally in a human voice. "What? No, no, I am not a human imprisoned in a dog body. I am as doggy as one can get, a dog all the way. Oh, we practice the speech of all the different creatures here. It makes the eternity pass faster. I'm learning meadow lark talk now. That Dog Caliph was a very great man. He came from the Mountains of Africa, and he led a million slaves in revolt. And when the slave revolt was broken, the reigning Caliph had the dead body of the leader brought here so he could be 'King of the Dogs' who had been the 'King of the Slaves'. But now he will be relieved of his reign which he had begun to find irksome. The Dog Magician will help him to walk from his throne to his new-dug grave. And then he will have his rest. And the One-Day Caliph Al-Amin will sit on the Dog Throne and reign in his place."

And indeed the Dog Magician had taken charge of things, and he went to the skeletal King of Slaves on his throne.

"It is time for you to rise and walk for the last time, Old King," the Dog Magician said (he looked something like a snow-white fox). "It will not be very hard. A walking spirit will enter into you for a very brief period and will help you to walk."

"Where will I walk?" the dead King of the Slaves asked.

"To your grave new-dugged over there in the mud. Will that please you?"

"Yes. I'll sleep in the ancestral mud then, and I ask you not to disturb me again. I'd rather lie in the black mud of Africa than in the yellow mud of this place between the rivers. But I can rest in mud of whatever color."

The King of Slaves, aided by the walking spirit that entered him briefly, moved jerkily to his new-dug grave and fell down in it. And two dogs with shovels covered him up.

"Now it is time for *You* to rise and walk to your Dog Throne, Al-Amin Caliph of Dogs," the Dog Magician said. "A rise-and-walk spirit will enter into you briefly and aid you to walk."

Dead Al-Amin sat up with a wheezing effort. He fell clumsily off the dog cart, and then he rose with an agony of effort and staggered to the Dog Throne. Scheherazade came and walked beside him to the throne and helped him to ascend it and to sit on it. The Dog Caliph throne had never been easy for a human to sit on. It was made first of all to accommodate a sitting dog. Then it was made to accommodate three other sitting creatures. And only after that was it made to accommodate a sitting human.

"What is he to you?" the Dog Magician asked Scheherazade.

"He is my husband of one day only," Scheherazade said. "I am Scheherazade the story-teller and I am almost always the wife of the reigning Caliph."

"Story-teller, you haven't heard stories till you have heard the deep dog stories that are sometimes told in this place. They are grotesque, they are ridiculous, they are incongruous, they are lopsidedly funny beyond anything that a human story-teller knows, they are everything that a good story should be."

"Maybe I'll hear some of them while I'm here," Scheherazade said.

"Scheherazade, you cannot stay here," the battered and worried body of the dead Caliph Al-Amin said. "There is nothing for you here. I being dead and set up here as a sort of mockery am an impediment to any healthy relationship."

"Oh, I'll go back at midnight, Al-Amin," she said. "And I've enjoyed your company in the few moments I've had of it out of the few hours that we've been married. What is it like to be dead, Al-Amin, can you tell me?"

"You are always the story-teller, damsel," Al-Amin croaked in a borrowed voice, "and you are always in search for strange informations and strange sensations. But there is none of either in me. What is it like to be dead? It is dull, Scheherazade, dull, dull, and again dull."

"I want the body of my son Al-Amin," the Boy-Caliph Harun al-Rashid piped up in his clown's voice. "I want to play tricks and jokes with it. One can play a lot of good practical jokes with a dead body."

"Not with this one, Harun," Scheherazade said. "Look to your own body, Dwarf-Caliph. You have it for only a few more short minutes."

The Dog Magician came and talked to several of us who had left the Ovation-Parade of Mamun the Great to go down Dog Alley and through the Dog Gate.

"You will notice the fountain yonder," the Dog Magician said. "It was made of bright and shining ceramic of colors so bright and vivid that they sometimes produced pleasant aching in human eyes. Once the whole Valley of the Two Rivers was made of such magic and colorful and brilliant ceramic, but now most of the valley has reverted to mud, and the colors could not be seen here in any case, now that this has become Dog Country."

"The fountain yonder is the famous Fountain of Life-Bubbles. Though the New Caliph Mamun the Great says that there are other fountains of Life-Bubbles in Central Asia, yet I have never heard of them. You have heard, perhaps, that when a criminal is about to be executed in Baghdad, he will usually be given one of these ninety-year-long pleasant lives to live in exchange for the unpleasant life that is being taken from him. We will soon give the Harun person one or several of these convincing surrogate lives to live, just as soon as his japing and jibing have stirred both people and dogs against him to the point of murder. Harun suspects, and I suspect also, that this life of his which is coming to an end is the last life that he will have, that he will be born no more. I am almost sure that his present life is his seventh and last, though his history is very difficult to reconstruct."

"I am convinced that he will demand one or several of the Life-Bubbles when he comes abruptly up against the moment of his death. I understand that he has always refused them before with the confidence that he will be reborn again. These Life-Bubbles or surrogate-lives may satisfy him more than they satisfy other persons, and a deeper life would be wasted on him."

"The sad secret of the bubble-lives is that they are Dogs' Lives, in all senses of that term. Oh, they are happy enough lives, for most dogs and for some people. But they would not satisfy any deep person, not even a deep dog like myself."

"There is a secret about Harun's heart also. I don't know what it is, but we will have his heart out of him by the time his last breath leaves his body. And then we will see what the secret is. The Dog Doctor has always said that Harun's heart is nonfunctional."

Well, the Harun was busy provoking outrageous riots to his own delight. He was busy all the afternoon and evening with his outrages.

The hangers-on from Harun had been with him as an audience for his demeaning jokes. But in the early hours of the night another sort of human came down Dog Lane and through the Dog Gate to the deep Dog Country. These people were sorrowful and sullen, and perhaps they were bent on revenge. They did not applaud the Harun jokes. They began to growl against Harun even as the dogs were growling against him.

"Harun, you Boy-Caliph," one sad woman said, "you killed my daughter just to get laughs from such vermin as are laughing at your jokes now. You had them take my daughter and —"

"I remember! Ah, I remember!" the Harun hooted. "I remember the look on her face when she realized that it was an all-the-way joke. And I remember the look on *your* face. Oh, no matter what happens to me now, they can never take away such fun as that which I've had! I wish you had another daughter here now and we could go through the all-the-way joke again. Oh, the very stars giggled at that!"

Other sullen persons accused Harun of other deaths and damages, and he chortled with laughter as he recalled every one of those jokes with his unfailing memory. He laughed, he yowled. His green wig was askew, and he dribbled green spittle in his laughter.

But his end came quickly when it came.

"Evil Harun," one woman said. "You had my husband killed by wild and savage dogs." The sad woman was carrying a bucket. "You had an essence which when spilled on a person would attract savage dogs to attack that person and tear him to pieces."

"I remember, I remember," the Harun giggled. "Oh, I wish I had some of that essence now! Then we'd see some action and fun!"

"You have it, Harun, you have it now!" the sad woman shouted, and she poured the whole bucketful of the essence over the head of the Boy-Caliph Harun al-Rashid. And then there was indeed action, if not fun.

The savage dogs by the dozens began to attack Harun and tear him to pieces.

"Life-Bubbles, Life-Bubbles!" Harun screamed, and the tongue that wobbled in his mouth was green. "At least two of them. I must have at least two of them."

The Dog Magician delivered two of the strange Life-Bubbles to the dying Harun, two pleasant lives of ninety years each. And he lived them fully as sequence in the last ten seconds of his regular-irregular life. But they were dogs' lives. Then the dogs killed him.

The Dog Magician managed to get Harun's living heart out of his breast just before he drew his last breath. He gave it to Scheherazade.

"For you are his widow also," he said. "You are the widow of both the dead Caliphs here." Harun's heart was transparent, and it was full of a clear liquid in which a small gold fish swam.

"Can this be all of his heart?" Scheherazade asked in amazement. "Is this thing all the heart he had?"

"Yes, all of it," the Dog Magician assured her. "It's been that way with each of his seven lives: some small or miniaturized creature in a transparent sack every time. The first one was a small and everlastingly barking dog. The second one was a coral snake. The third one was a pig. The fourth one was an alligator, the fifth one a weasel, the sixth one a blue bird, and this seventh one the gold fish. His hearts have always been non-functional as hearts. The Harun bodies themselves have always been mere contraptions indwelt by various grubby devils. Dog Devils, they have been called, but we dogs do not like that term."

"Whatever will I do with it?" Scheherazade asked the whole of Dog Country in an exasperated voice.

"Keep me," the gold fish chirped-whistled in a cricket-like voice. "You will find me a pleasant companion and a good conversationalist. And the stories I could tell you of the boundless deep!"

"Have you always been a gold fish?" Scheherazade asked the creature.

"No. I am a golden whale. I have always been a golden whale, though now I am miniaturized in this damnable little bottle. I was the greatest of whales, and I leapt in the oceans of the world for centuries. I leapt, I dove, I sounded, I *lived*. Oh, the stories I could tell you, girl. Nobody else could ever tell you such vasty stories, and you *do* need a change in the palaver you have been putting out."

"You'd just be one more thing for me to carry around," Scheherazade said.

"Oh, have me installed along with my bottle. You can have me installed parallel to your functional heart. There is a Dog Surgeon here who can do the job in a matter of seconds. Then

you will always have me to talk to. You will always have me as an unfailing friend. Oh, I reveled in all the oceans of the world, but I'd been warned not to swim in the Arabian Ocean. I did it anyhow. And I got taken by the cheapest of all Arabian tricks, the bottle trick. But take me and have me installed, and we'll get along."

Scheherazade had the Dog Surgeon install the clear vial with the miniaturized golden whale in it. It was installed parallel to her own functional heart. And she hardly knew it was there.

At midnight the bunch of us went back through the Dog Gate and up Dog Lane to attend the lively bashes of the New Caliph Mamun the Great.

The 999th Night Of Scheherazade

This is Essindibad Copperbottom Master Mariner back as captain of his own journal again. We were joined at the Mamun-the-Great Bash at about midnight by John Thunderson and his mechanical bride Blue Moon, by Damsel Scheherazade, and by two upper-crust or lace-curtain dogs, the Dog Magician and the Dog Surgeon both of whom wrote declarations into the Royal Archives on the matter of the death and burial of Harun al-Rashid, and on other matters.

“Thunderson, there are artisans waiting on you,” Mamun the Great called. “I want them to construct one hundred Open-Ended-Analytics Almost-Anything Space Ships like yours, and I want them to do it within the present hour. The ship-scooting devils now believe themselves beyond pursuit, and they will be less wary than they were a few hours ago as they move to spread themselves to the various worlds in the various ships. Of course, it would not be possible to overtake them, but I understand that such a thing is not necessary. With one of your Almost-Anything space ships, a pilot could simply posit that he will be ahead of a fleeing space ship, and he will be there. He can posit that he has the capacity to destroy it, and so he will be able to destroy it. Will there be any difficulty about the artisans building one hundred space ships within the hour and deploying them wherever they are needed?”

Scheherazade placed a sort of uncorked flask against an outer wall of the plush palace room where we were reveling. I am sure I am the only one who saw her do this, though she did it openly. She has the trick of doing quite open things and not having them noticed.

“Oh, there's a thousand things that I'd have to consider,” John Thunderson stammered, “and I will begin at the beginning and go over it all thoroughly, and then —”

“No, there will *not* be any difficulty,” Thunderson's mechanical wife Blue Moon interrupted firmly. “When John begins to consider things, he's lost. So I will not allow him to consider things, only to do things quickly. It will all be done, Caliph. Consider it already taken care of. Come along, John Thunderson my love, and we'll set those Almost-Anything Space Ships to blossoming like sudden stars in the various skies.”

The uncorked flask that Scheherazade had placed against the wall had grown to a hundred times its former size, but still nobody noticed it except myself the sharp-eyed Essindibad Copper-bottom.

“Let a Master Mechanism-Winder go along with them to be sure that Blue Moon does not run down,” the Caliph Mamun the Great decreed. “When she is well wound up she is as competent a person as there is in the whole Caliphate. Well, that's one worry off my mind. Scheherazade, the escape of the Devils has taken a sharp turn in our favor, a turn such as not even your fictionizing could have conceived of. The fellows have always lacked discipline and dedication. If I were in charge of them I'd straighten them out. Well, they've gone horseback-crazy and dromedaryback-crazy after their thousands of years long confinement, and then —”

“— and then they race their stolen horses and dromedaries like crazy,” Scheherazade cut in. Well, that flask against the wall, it that had increased in size a hundred or a thousand times, now seemed to be a mysterious room with a round doorway in it. “— and they bet more money than there is in the world on the races. They've set up a whole town just East of Baghdad and thrice as big. They've named it ‘Carouse Town’, and the fixed horse-races and dromedary-races are only a small part of it. There's ten thousand crap games going on there, and all the dice are loaded. Citizens of Baghdad are rushing there by the thousands to get in on the fun, and they're being rolled by the hundreds every minute. Knock-out drops are flowing like oceans there. When they run out of money and are still unrolled, they sell their souls to an exchequer devil for a thousand gold pieces each. And then they're broke again after ten minutes at the gaming tables. Then they are garroted and their bodies are thrown

into a quicksand pit on the South edge of Carouse Town."

"I know the pit," Mamun the Great said. "And I'm glad it's being filled up with *something*. But my reports give only about half of that stuff as happening yet."

"Only about half of that stuff *has* happened yet," Scheherazade said, "but the rest of it is in the process of happening. I have it all detailed out in my fictions, and the facts always follow my fictions pretty quickly. I have some pretty detailed things planned out for you also, Royal one."

"It's perfect!" Mamun rasped. "It puts us ahead of the devils. You have found work for the idle hands and hearts of the devils to do. They will be so busy raising hell in Carouse Town that they'll have no time left to cause mischief."

"Mamun the Great, there is one doorway in this great palace that you must on no account enter, that circular door over there," Scheherazade said. "Those two locksmiths who have just come are going to put a door and a lock on it. And I will have the only key. A lady has to have a secret room of her own."

"Not in *my* palace she doesn't!" Mamun exploded. "Damsel, don't do anything dangerous. This is the 999th night of your stay in Baghdad, and you have received 998 stays of execution from the previous Caliphs because of your story-telling prowess. Well, you may not receive that 999th or 1000th or 1001th stay of execution if you give me that smart talk. Remember that it is only in your fictional outline that you live to the end of the affair. Be careful!"

"Once I have total control of that secret room over there, I'll not have to be careful," Scheherazade stated pridefully. "My power will be unassailable then. In just two minutes the locksmiths will have put a door in that doorway, and I will be the only one who can open it. Then, for reasons too subtle to try to explain to you, I'll have total power here. Oh, Um, Um, Um! I'm going to love that!"

"Guards!" Mamun the Great called out. "Cut the ears off those two locksmiths standing by that circular doorway there. That's just to show them that I mean business. Good, good, well done! Why do grown men make such an outcry when their ears are cut off? They can get along almost as well without their exterior ears. Rattle my brains if I can remember what is in that room, but then I haven't been in this particular palace since my boyhood. But there *wasn't* any circular doorway there. And the only thing on the other side of that wall is the Outdoors. Damsel Scheherazade, I'll find out what you are up to with your trickery. I'll find out pretty fast.

The New Caliph Mamun the Great rushed through the circular doorway in his wrath. And the circular doorway seemed to be greatly diminished as soon as he had disappeared through it. Scheherazade hurried over and popped the cork in the opening, and then she laughed as she held the bottle in her hands.

No, there hadn't really been any room there, nor any circular door. There had been only the circular opening in the little bottle or jug. And the New Caliph Mamun the Great now found himself a prisoner in this bottle which the laughing Scheherazade held in her hands.

"Mamun my love, you will have to put a rein on your temper," Scheherazade gurgled. "Those weren't locksmiths. I was just having fun when I said they were. You should have known the difference between locksmiths' frocks and barbers' frocks. They were two barbers who came to see whether they couldn't do something about that atrocious beard of yours. You yourself sent for the two best barbers in Baghdad, and when they came you had their ears cut off. The joke wasn't worthy of you. It's like a joke that Harun would have pulled."

"Scheherazade, damnable woman!" Mamun the Great thundered (but his thunder was muted because of him being reduced to less than a hundredth of his former size). "Scheherazade, are you cheesy enough to pull the oldest of all tricks on me, the Genie-Bottle-Trick? Thy head will roll this night, wench. Besides, it won't work. It's illegal. I am only one sixteenth Ifrit-Genie by blood, and a person must be one eighth of the gullible blood for it to work."

"Thou'rt one sixteenth Ifrit-Genie and one sixteenth dolt," Scheherazade said with a fine edge of merriment in her voice, "and the two bloods are added together in this. The trick *will* work on you, and the proof of it is that it is working. We will negotiate now. You will negotiate from weakness and I will negotiate from strength."

"No, wench, no! *I* am the Caliph of the World!"

"There is one thing that a Caliph cannot survive, my love, and that is the derision of the people. Oh how they will laugh and deride if I show you imprisoned in a little bottle in my hand!"

"Let us negotiate from equality then, beloved wife of my bosom and beard of my chin. I tell you that I find you the most charming woman of the world. And I tell you that by the law of the Caliphate, enacted by my own pseudo-father, the Scheherazade Person is always the wife of the reigning Caliph so long as they both shall live. But if I'm imprisoned in a bottle, there's no way I can show you what a loving husband I really am. Let me out of here at once, and your head will have a little less likelihood of rolling tonight."

"Oh, I intend to let you out of the bottle quite often, Mamun. But I have a mechanism (it's based on the open-ended-analytics of John Thunderson) to bring you back into the bottle whenever I decide that you've been free long enough. For a starter, you will be allowed out for one hour of every twenty-four to fulfill your loving-husband duties to me. We will be thousands of miles and hundreds of years away from here, but I think you'll like your new where-and-when, once you stop beating your head against the inside of the bottle."

"But how will I perform my duties as a Caliph here if I'm thousands of miles and hundreds of years away from here?"

"Oh, I'll have John Thunderson teach you about open-ended-analytics so you can make instant voyages of the time-and-space. But I can still call you back across that time-and-space when your hours as Caliph are over with for the day. How long will it take you to discharge your daily or nightly duties as Caliph?"

"I don't see how I can do it in less than three hours out of twenty-four, Scheherazade."

"All right, three hours a day to be Caliph. Anything else?"

"A Caliph is expected to be married to a princess of one the old Baghdad families. It will not hurt that I have a wife on each end of the line since the ends will be so very far apart both in time and space. You cannot object to my being married to somebody who died more than a thousand years before you were born, and who will be clear on the other side of the world from you anyhow. It will take about three hours out of twenty-four, and this includes both public appearances and private romping."

"All right, that's fair. I suspect that your royal bride here will be Princess Fatima Mara Nar Moudi Soukar. She cloy a little, and I'm jealous of her. But I'll just keep telling myself 'why should I be jealous of a dumpy little fat girl who's been dead for fourteen hundred years and the worms have eaten her?' All right, Mamun. What else do you need?"

"Will we be living in the City that has those '*Old Time Classical Monster Movies*' that you told me about? What was the place where they had them four times a week?"

"It was the '*Old Time Classical Monster Movie Emporium*' on Blackwater Street in Chicago. And if we come up with a little extra cash for them, we can have monster movies run *seven* nights a week. And they love such sponsors and donors as we will be. They run about four hours a night (it's always a double bill), and then I believe you'll want to strut around in a monster costume in front of the theatre for about an hour before and after the show. All right, Mamun. We'll assign six hours out of twenty-four for that. What other times-out will you need?"

While all this was going on, my wife the Grand Dame had been whispering with Scheherazade in a very suspicious manner. And now, while Scheherazade waited for Mamun to state his further needs, I heard Scheherazade whisper in a sort of aside to my wife:

"I'm sure you can find just about what you want at a hundred different places on Cork and Bottle Street just around the corner from here. In Baghdad, almost every street you can think of is just around the corner." Then my wife the Grand Dame went out of the palace, possibly to Cork and Bottle Street. But whatever was she looking for?

"Horseback riding," Mamun the Great said to Scheherazade. "I must gallop a royal Arabian horse an hour every day."

"You are high on Arabian horses only because you have never seen a newer day nag. No, only four days a week may you enjoy yourself on a royal Arabian horse. And three days a week you may ride a newer day nag of North Chicago Stock at the *North Barrington Naggery and Riding Academy*. I'm anxious for you to improve yourself and upgrade your tastes. I'll put down an hour a day for your riding anyhow. What else, my corked-and-bottled lover?"

My wife the Grand Dame returned to the Mamun-Bash in the palace; and she set a sort of uncorked flask against and outer wall of the plush palace room where we were reveling. Why did this inconsequential doing of hers seem somehow reminiscent and portentous?

"I'll have to carouse with my old friends the horse-and-camel soldiers who were such staunch supporters of mine in the frontier battles," Mamun the Great told Scheherazade. "It's for old fellowship and all that, you know. Man stuff and all that. We eat and drink and have

medium-bloody fights, and become friends again. We tell high lies and show off our knife and axe throwing and collect new scars. I use the word *carouse* in the loosest possible sense, and it'll take about six hours a day of untrammelled freedom to get all that carousing in."

"Yes, all right, dear," Scheherazade said. "I grant you the free time gladly. Six hours a day. And what other free time do you require?"

"One hour a day out for wrestling," Mamun said. "I believe I am the best wrestler for my weight in any time or place. One hour a day for playing chess, one hour a day for playing backgammon with the champions, one hour a day for an outrageous-glutton meal, one hour a day for playing a flute in a flute band, one hour a day for reciting my poetry to whatever crowds may be dragooned into listening to it (but the compulsion must not be too obvious). An hour a day for press conferences and media appearances. Now how many hours does that make out of the twenty-four?"

"That totals up to twenty-seven hours out of twenty-four, dear. That makes you overdrawn by three hours at a bank that does not permit overdrawals. So on the last seven items you will do each of them only once a week instead of once a day. So that will account for twenty-one out of the twenty-four hours. That leaves you only three hours daily as a prisoner in the bottle. And you can easily pass those three hours in sleep or meditation and hardly be bothered by them at all. Do you agree, my love? — as if you had a choice."

"I do not agree that I should be called a prisoner in the bottle for even three hours a day, though I will spend three hours a day in this straited place. To maintain a fiction that I am not a prisoner, I want the cork fixed so that I can *lock it from the inside*. Then it will be my unique place of refuge rather than my prison."

"Agreed, my love, agreed," Scheherazade said.

Scheherazade and the bottled Caliph Mamun the Great took off for a later time and a more westerly land in one of the Almost-Anything space ships. And the off-world spies took off for their own worlds in similar ships newly fashioned by the artisans. Some of the devils would indeed get to their worlds, and they must combat them there. The Earth had had endemic devils for many millennia and had built up a certain resistance to them. But the devil-invasions would be epidemics as they came to the worlds that did not have the devil experience.

My Good Wife and I would ourselves go in another Almost-Anything ship in just a moment. And then this episode would be finished.

Epilog Of Sea-Weed And Hope

My Wife The Grand Dame of the Musics stood in the circular entrance of the mysterious room and spoke to somebody inside.

"Wait there just a short moment, my darling," she said. "I'll just go and slip into something skimpier. No, my husband doesn't suspect a thing. I've put spells and charms on him so that he can no longer hear very well or see very well or think very well. But they weren't necessary: he was pretty far gone anyhow. It's really an act of charity to dump him. In just a moment, my inexpressible love."

My wife rushed away from there, apparently in some sort of turmoil. And I rushed through the circular doorway to throttle the false person inside the mysterious room. But there was nobody in the room. I turned, and I faced a cork-stopper that had just been rammed into place. And a sad truth dawned on me. Oh, the sad truth was rammed into my face at the same time the cork of the bottle was! But I collected myself quickly.

"Suppose we take the Scheherazade-Mamun agreement as a model for our own agreement," I called to my wife who was the one who had rammed the cork into the bottle. "And then we'll see how we can improve the agreement. She was a little bit harsh in her terms, I believe." I spoke this bravely to my wife who held the bottle in her hand after she had corked it.

"Suppose we don't make any agreement at all, Sindbad Copperbottom," my wife said in a voice that made my blood run cold. "What does it indicate to you that I am holding a little bottle in the palm of my hand and that you are on the inside of that bottle?"

"I don't know what it indicates exactly," I said, feeling uncomfortable in my mind.

"It indicates that I've outgrown you," she said. "That happens to people, you know."

"No, no, no!" I cried out (it is very hard to cry out with effect when one is corked inside a bottle), "we were made for each other. I am the Alpha Male. I am the Great Sindbad than whom none can be greater. And you are my wife the Grand Dame, the so-called 'Woman without equal', though that phrase may need some qualification. How and when could things have changed between us?"

"There is no 'how' to the way things change between people," my Grand Dame said in a new and crisp voice that I found a little bit less than pleasing. "And the first 'when' was when you were beshorn of your totemic Sea-Weed by a mechanical doll, so you ceased to be both the Alpha Male and the Great Sindbad. And the second 'when' was when you just now fell for the old bottle trick immediately after you saw Mamun the Great fall for it. You were thrice feeble-minded to fall for it under such conditions, and it astonished me completely. I set it up only for a pleasant joke and I surely had no idea that you would fall for it. That was the last straw that demoted you to being the back-end of a camel. You're dead, Sindie, you're dead now to all practical purposes."

Oh, was there ever such a 'Long Loneliness of a Master Mariner'? At home my Wife the Grand Dame loved that sad song and she used to pay it on the harpsichord.

Was there ever such a shipwreck as mine is now!

I am shipwrecked in a bottle no more than six inches long, and I'm not even sure what world I'm on now. I asked my wife, but she said, "To a gooper fish, or to a prisoner in the bottle, it does not matter what world he's on." This bottle which is now my abode — my wife carries it around with her in her hafiza, and so I am in total darkness most of the time (except for a luminescence of my own). I can often hear my wife exchanging jocularities with her male and female friends (she seems to have very many new male friends now), but there is no way that anyone could hear me though I roar and thunder from the bottom of my brave heart.

Sometimes she takes the bottle out and shows me to one of her new gentlemen friends.

"It is a Sindbad toy," she says. "I obtained it when I was in Baghdad of Earth-World in the time period that is known as the Arabian Middle Ages. It is an animated toy and it is made to simulate the emotions of fury and despair. Sindbad-the-Sailor in the legend was a do-everything-wrong anti-hero."

"I'm familiar with the Sindbad Legend," the gentlemen friend said. "Wouldn't it be a good comic touch if you put an iota of toy Sea-Weed at his bifurcation. One of the attributes of Sindbad was that he had Sea-Weed growing on him."

"I would rather not go into the totemism of the Sea-Weed," my wife said. "It has disappointing associations."

That little conversation of those two cut me to the heart. That I should be mistaken for an animated toy!

I receive three pinches of fish-food a week. Well, I rather like it, but only three pinches a week leaves me a little hungry. At night my wife takes the bottle out of her hafiza or 'purse' and sets it on a shelf. My wife likes to sleep in the dark, but I am developing a luminescence of my own as is the case of many Ancient Mariners. It is green, the green of a ship's wake in an iodine-tinged sea at night, and it shines out of my eyes. By this luminescent light of my own eyes I am able to see to write in my journal during my long night in the bottle.

If my wife had remembered the journal (I have always kept it strapped to my body under my qamis) she would probably have taken it away from me. But I have it yet, and I write these words in it.

I am a buoyant person and I have not entirely given up hope, though I sure do come close.

My Grand Dame and I don't talk to each other much nowadays. And when we do talk our conversations are a little bit tart.

"The Book of Jasher says that 'an acetous woman is like the leaf that the palmer-worm will eat and destroy,'" I quoted to her once for her corrections.

"The Book of Loos says that 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend,'" she came back at me. "Hey Sindie, I'm really making it big with diamonds now. Do you remember how diamonds were dirt-cheap back on Earth-World during the Arabian Middle Ages? Now that I have a John-Thunderson type Almost-Anything Space Ship I can haul tons of diamonds every day from there to here where there is just no end to the market for good diamonds, and no limit to the price that one can get for them."

"The Book of Bahr says that 'The Love of lucre that outruns compassion is like fingernails still growing after the corpse is dead!'" I told her.

"It's half-rations of fish-food you'll be on for a month on account of that, Sindbad Copperbottom," she spoke sharply, "and I'm switching to a new and nauseous brand of fish-food just for you. This fish-food was developed to cut down on the over-populations in certain fish-bowls and aquariums. A mere pinch of it would eat holes in the stomachs of all but the most hearty of the fish and would reduce the bowl populations almost instantly. But it had one drawback. It had to be taken off the market because it also ate holes in the glass fish-bowls and aquariums. You'd never guess how cheap I got a box of it at one of those '*Off-The-Market Super-Sale Stores*'. Well, have fun, Sindie."

Well, the food in this prison-bottle is clearly sub-standard.

I once had a bit of advice from an Ifrit who himself had spent ten thousand years imprisoned in a bottle. "When you find yourself miniaturized and imprisoned in a world a billion billion times too small, there is only one thing to do then: Think Big!" So I have been thinking big.

For some time I have been thinking big in my miniaturized condition. I have used parts of the Open-Ended-Analytics System of that dumb meddling kid John Thunderson. I have used some of the equations of the Dog Mathematician who had become a hit at the court of Mamun the Great in the hours just before our leaving. I used some of the Ancient Mathematics of the Magi, the Armenian one who sometimes lived in the Ark itself, the one we had talked to outside the Walls of Baghdad. And I borrowed some of the remarkable speculations out of Qabtaan Yousafir's '*Mathematics for Navigators*', the only mathematics text I know of that is written entirely in verse. It is a book that I have found invaluable on several of my adventure-voyages. I realized, of course, that my problem with the bottle was a mathematical problem. I had to find the Evertion Equation, the one that would evert my bottle and leave me on the outside of it and put all the rest of the universe on the inside of it.

And I *did* discover that equation in a lightning blaze of cognition. I applied the equation, and it worked! I was on the outside of the bottle. I was elated. But my elation was short-lived.

I was on the outside of the bottle, freezing in absolute zero temperature and dying for lack of air. And all of the billioned-galaxy universe was cozy inside the bottle.

Naturally I rescinded the equation and returned the universe and myself to the previous status quo. What I had to come up with now was an equation that would put me outside the bottle and leave the universe outside the bottle where it already was.

Oh my stomach! I am driven by hunger to eat a little bit of the damnable fish-food, and I am driven by the horrible my-stomach-being-eaten-up feeling and fact to retch the fish food up again. And to add to my woes, I have sprained my ankle. I tripped on a rough place in the bottle where I had been retching up the fish-food and where the fish-food then had been eating a hole in the bottle.

Oh, I had to solve the mathematical impasse presented by the tantalizing equation. After nine days and nights of unremitting thought, I *did* solve the mathematical impasse, and I was filled with joy, for a short while. I should explain to non-mathematicians that there are two ways of solving a mathematical impasse. One way is to discover the equation in question. And the other way is to prove conclusively that such an equation is impossible. I solved the impasse by the second way. It was a brilliant and elegant mathematical tour-de-force, but it left me still inside the bottle.

On this realization I fell into a deep despondency. And my despondency was made still deeper when I sprained my other ankle at that dangerous place where the fish-food had been eating a hole in the bottle. There was really a perilous spot there. Somebody could get hurt at that place, and the only somebody in the bottle was me.

Will this be the end of Myself the Great Sindbad? Will this Thirteenth Voyage be my last voyage, and will it end in failure? Why are lesser persons so much more fortunate than I am?

Take that dumb kid John Thunderson the False Sindbad! Every thing he touches turns to success. And now I hear that he is going to abandon the Sindbad role and become either of several comic strip characters. Yes, I do get a little bit of news here in my bottle, but I'll not confide even to this my journal how I get it.

Take the Spy Cato of Camiroi, take the Spy Alexander of Astrobe, both of them my inferiors in all ways, both of them now home safely and heroes in their home worlds. The unfairness of it all shocks me.

I fell into the lowest state of my spirits that I have ever fallen to. "Contemptible man," I said to myself, "just look at you, just look at you!"

I saw one thing when I looked at myself closely, a thing that changed the entire situation.

Real and genuine Sea-Weed was growing on me again. I was the Real Sindbad once more. I was the Alpha Male again. And if the real Sea-Weed was growing on me now, then it was no longer growing on the usurper John Thunderson. I am the Real Sindbad again, and Hope Eternal springs up and overflows my breast.

Reader of this journal (and I believe that it will someday have a reader) know you that if you find the journal in this bottle and myself gone, then I am away safe and on the outside. And if you find the journal here and my bones here with it, that still will not mean that I am dead. I have some idea about stuffing off my bones to be able to pour myself through a sudden hole in the bottle, one too small for me to traverse with my bones intact. There is precedent for this. The old Pirate Captain, Redbeard the Snake, had once sluffed off his bones to slip out of a particularly tight situation. They called him 'The Snake' because of his slithering, boneless walk thereafter.

And, reader, if you find what appears to be an empty bottle here, look again. The journal is sure to be in some dim corner of the bottle, and it is quite small. Look for it. It's worth it.

I maybe able to get out by the hole in the bottle before I die of starvation or fish-food poisoning, but it sure will be close.

Fish Food! Horrible and lovely Fish Food that I am unable to eat! Eat at the bottle, Fish Food, and do not stop eating at it. Eat the hole bigger and bigger. Today my Grand Dame will put my weekly ration of fish-food into the bottle, and I have high hopes that it will mean the breakthrough.

And now a little side light, the last which I will shine upon you, and then the journal will end.

Some time ago, when I was at the depths of my despondency, I found a dirty little thing

in my pocket, and it was a fresh-water ark-shell. I'd have thrown it away, but how far away can you throw something in a bottle no more six inches long? Thunderson the False Sindbad must have given it to me. He believed that the ark-shells could be used as communicating devices. "If you have an ark-shell and know how to use it, then you can never be alone or friendless wherever you are," he said. "Put it to your ear and listen to it. Put it to your mouth and talk into it. And you will be part of a universe-wide network of friendship, the great brotherhood of the Ark-Shell Show devotees. Really, it will work."

In the depths of my despondency I tried it, and it did work. I became a part of that friendship and hobby and passion and ongoing drama. In fact, my Thirteenth Voyage in which I am still involved became an ongoing feature on the Ark-Shell Show. And I got feed-back from my fans, from my hundreds and thousands of fans in a dozen centuries and on at least seventeen worlds.

"Your real forte is comedy," at least a hundred of them told me. "Your Thirteenth Voyage may be the funniest thing ever done, and you may be the greatest comedian ever."

Oh, it is fulfilling to be widely appreciated, even if for the wrong things. Well dammit, I bet this is the funniest comedy ever, and I bet that I'm in the funniest situation ever, though there's a good chance I'll die in it. Thanks, guys, thanks!

This is the end of the writing of the journal. Now comes the final action by which I will either live or die. I lay the journal here, and I break my pen. The name of the Journal is:

Sindbad, The Thirteenth Voyage.

And it has a subtitle:

A Manuscript Found in a Bottle.